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Isaac Asimov

THE WEEK EXCUSE

JUNE 75c • UK 30p.

SON OF THE MORNING, a new novella by

PHYLLIS GOTLIEB

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Phyllis Gotleib does not write a great deal of science fiction—her last story here dates back to April 1967 ("Planetoid Idiot")—but when she does write sf, it is superior stuff. The story below concerns, among other things, a couple of unusual aliens, specifically, two huge, crimson cats, who pay an unplanned visit to a 19th century Polish village. It's fascinating reading.

Son of the Morning

by PHYLLIS GOTLIEB

BY THE TIME KHRENG AND Prandra came out of deepsleep the ship was in Solthree orbit. Lights warmed around them, the deep yellow of their sun; they slipped the clasps of their webbing, leaped out snarling and yawning hugely, stretched to the limit the hinges of their fanged jaws.

Khreng was a seasoned traveler; he had been twice to the system called the Center of Worlds, where Galactic Federation was based, and once to Sol III. Prandra had never before lifted off Ungruwarkh, but her mind broadcast no complaints, and he asked for none.

The ship was wakening, systems quickened from maintenance level. Khreng's blood rose with the heat, and he wrapped his tail round Prandra's waist; she tapped his nose lightly with the pads of her hand. "Food first."

He growled without malice and dug in the food locker. "Dog food!" That's what it was. Meat for cats was as scarce in the Center as it was on Ungruwarkh, but colonists demanded and got amenities for their dogs.

"Wuff, wuff!" said Prandra. "I can eat dogs too. Little things you say they are? Why do I leave Ungruwarkh?"

"On Solthree you get meat."

Nice fat people, she thought slyly.

"Then you get killed. They have death bullets there," he pointed through the viewer to the blue-brown globe stippled with white, "not stunners like the GalFeds'."

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She spat.

They ate and got full but not satisfied; then they coupled, combed each other, and bathed. "Now the ESP."

He picked up a small blunt rod and pushed a button. Their fingers were too broad and padded, and their prehensile tails too thick, to handle the controls designed for humans and many other life-forms, but they had a multitude of small implements, some they had made, others had been made for them; no task they were determined to perform was impossible for them.

At the press of the button the ESP's case opened slowly to the warmed air, and the ESP began to waken.

His name was Espinoza, but he refused to be called ESPinoza, said it was too robotic. He was a brain in a midnight-blue glasstex globe, three hundred years old, and he had spent seventy-seven of them as a man. His self-image was this: a man thirty-eight years old, of medium height, brown-skinned and wiry, black hair and mustache, deep brown eyes, white even teeth. Scarce as ESPs were, even good second-graders, over two hundred years was a long time to spend as a brain in an upside-down fishbowl; he often said he was tired. "How can you feel tired?" his superiors asked with unconscious cruelty. *:Believe me, I know when I'm tired.:* Brain cells number in the trillions, but they die eventually without regrowing, and he knew he was raveling around the edges.

His thoughts gathered:

*A string of onions hanging on the wall, my mother's house. . .*like everyone else's his oldest memories were the strongest.

Diego! Diego, it's morning and he had grown up in a slum in Sao Paulo, what was there to wake up for?

Dvora, will you

"Espinoza," Khreng said. "We're in orbit."

:Present and accounted for,: said Espinoza. *:Home already?:* A thought shaped like a sigh.

"What next?" Prandra asked. She too was an ESP and she would also become a brain in a globe; it was part of the price for the ship, the instruments, the meat. Her eyes were wide apart, bad for close work, and she peered with difficulty through the blue glass, wanting to see what she would become.

The brain, freed of its skull plates and suspended in the nutrient bath, had become smooth and spherical, anchored by the pink cables of the vertebral and carotid arteries leading down into the pump that fed them with blood. It was not a dramatic brain, it did

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not throb, bubble or blurp, but the pump hummed steadily, or it would have died.

"What's next, Espinoza?"

:Pick up the radio messages, eisenkop!:

Khreng grinned. He was not hungry enough to eat a three-hundred-year-old brain. He turned a knob.

The computer rattled, squawked and said:

GALFED RELAY STATION OF FIJI TO SHIPS IN SOLTHREE ORBIT:

THE FOLLOWING SHIPS ARE IN SOLTHREE ORBIT, DATE 7572/58/186/1132:

ANDROMEDA STAR, ORE CARRIER FROM SOLNINE. MESSAGE TO JOE WISNICKI OF WARSAW, SOLTHREE, IT'S A BOY, CONGRATULATIONS, MOTHER AND CHILD WELL—

"How long does this go on?"

:Be patient.:

YSKELADAR RUXCIMI, QUARANTINED HOSPITAL SHIP CARRYING 172 CASES FUNGUS PLAGUE, STAYING THREE MONTHS;

Khreng yawned.

ZARANDU OF THANAMAR VI, BENGTVADI SECTOR 221-278, SUPERFAST CRUISER, RELAYS MESSAGE TO *GALFED SURVEYOR 668X327* FROM GALFED CENTRAL—

"That's us!"

—ORIGINATING FELDFAR 553, ANAX II, LOCALLY UNGRUWARKH, TO KHRENG AND PRANDRA FROM GALFED OBSERVER STATION. MESSAGE: ALL IS WELL, THE (WORD UNCLEAR—KITS, KATS OR KIDS) THE KITS, KATS OR KIDS IN GOOD HEALTH, TUGRIK HAS HIS SECOND TEETH—

All those light-years for this? Prandra wondered.

"Be quiet, that is my son," Khreng said.

—AND EMERALD LOOKS LIKE A FIRST GRADE ESP.

"Ha." Prandra grinned. "And that is *our* daughter."

"It's time for a male to have the ESP." He raised his hand over the switch.

:Wait—:

WARNING TO ALL SHIPS IN SOLTHREE ORBIT. QUMEDNI SHIP TENTATIVE IDENTIFICATION: *AMHIBFA'S DAUGHTER OF KWEMEDN*, IS STILL ORBITING BEYOND GALFED LANES, EXACT WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN. DO NOT ON ANY ACCOUNT REPEAT DO NOT ON ANY ACCOUNT TRY TO CONTACT THIS SHIP: THE *RUXCIMI* TRIED CONTACT AND BURNT OUT A FIVE-STAR ESP. REPEAT—

:Switch off.:

"What is that about?"

:With luck we won't have to

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find out. If you have messages home, send them now. We go down in two hours twelve minutes.:

"First I want to see what is in this place once more," Prandra said. "There is not enough time before lift-off."

:Don't be long.: They left him, but his mind whispered behind them: *Burnt out the ESP? lucky devil. . .*the shape of a sigh hung like a raindrop from a branch. . . .

GalFed Surveyor 668X327 was a good used ship with a second-grade ESP, a new hypnoformer, and a late-model computer; and it belonged to Khreng and Prandra for as long as they wished to use it.

Khreng and Prandra were a pair of big crimson cats weighing about a hundred kilos each, Khreng slightly heavier, Prandra's fur a little darker. Digits rather more elongated than those of Earth cats gave them almost plantigrade feet and, with the help of the prehensile tail, fairly manipulative hands. They could walk on their hind legs with some discomfort, preferred to go on all fours and squat on their haunches to free their hands. It was hard to estimate their intelligence since no Ungrukh had ever agreed to be tested and there was no arguing with their fangs, claws and muscle.

The first GalFed surveyor team to touch down on Ungruwarkh stepped out on the barren plains, sniffed the air and coughed, and declared it a poverty planet. Their ESP had reported traces of primitive civilization, but they did not expect to find much.

While they were unloading, a big red cat appeared half a kilometer distant and loped quietly toward them.

:He likes your smell, he's hungry,: the ESP said, and they stiffened. *:But relax, he's much more curious. . .his name is Khreng.:*

He stood among them very still, and a cat-fancier from Solthree slowly put a hand on the massive head. A comparative anatomist from Sirius V considered bone structure, and had a stray thought of a lab and dissecting-table; Khreng grinned, and within fifteen seconds seventy-five cats, claws out and fangs bared, appeared from behind boulders and out of fissures and cracks, and ten minutes later truce terms were arranged. The ESP had been working so hard on the receiving end that he had not given thought to the possibility of telepathy in Earth-like jungle cats.

The planet, out on the tip of a Galactic arm, was a bit smaller than Sol III and a bit denser; it

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had a big yellow sun, rarefied air, and was half covered in water, not much of it fresh. Life spread thinly over a great chain of archipelagos spiraling from pole to pole; the climate ranged from semitropic at the equator to cold plains of red lava in the temperate zones; the cat-civilization, numbering about a million, lived in tribal units wherever food and water were available; competition for them was intense. They had never been threatened by larger predators—the meat animals, now near extinction, ran to pig and rodent types—and they had made few local adaptations except for the red fur with which they blended into the red of the sparse soil and the lava on the plains, and the big black chevron running from the crown of the head down either flank, much like deeply shadowed fissures in lava, centered with a thin white stripe resembling the salt and snow crystals that sifted into the cracks. They did not need weapons for the few animals they hunted, but they had developed sophisticated builders' tools for their shelters against the treeless cold of the plains, and the flotillas of rafts they used for fishing. They hated the fish, which harbored parasites that gave them enteritis, but they were starving.

Fortunately, GalFed was happy with the Ungrukh. (a) About a third of them were telepathic, most often the females, and many of these at least second-grade; ESPs are rare, particularly where language is advanced, and for Galactic liaison and socio-biological sciences they are invaluable; (b) they were an evolutionary puzzle, very nearly Solthree cats with big brains, language, and a civilization only a few thousand years old and no relatives to evolve from or with on the planet.

So GalFed got their proto-ESPs and Khreng and Prandra their ship with its ESP and equipment, and they were coming to be educated, like cat-Candides, in the ways of the world, the enriching and sowing of their meager soil with grain for fodder, the raising of cattle from stocks of frozen embryos.

:Time to go,: said Espinoza.

They wheeled him into the shuttle on a dolly and bolted him in. Khreng checked the ship once again. Everything was neat and tight. He stepped into the shuttle and pulled the switch for the lock-doors. Then he strapped himself down alongside Prandra.

:This boat's very light and it might yaw,: Espinoza said. *:Don't be nervous.:*

"Why are we nervous? There's nothing fearful here."

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:I wish you people would learn to use something beside the present tense.:

"Why must we?" Prandra asked. "It always is the present."

The radio beeped and said: *GALFED SURVEYOR,* YOUR CHANNEL REQUIRED FOR EMERGENCY LANDING. WILL YOU ACCEPT COURSE CHANGE OR WAIT ONE ORBIT?

ACCEPT COURSE CHANGE, Khreng answered. The last landing had given him a terrific case of motion sickness, and he wanted to get it over with.

Then for half an hour they spiraled downward. There was no yaw, no nausea. "This is much bet—" Khreng began, and Prandra screamed.

Something was going round and ringing. Them? Over and over and over. Warped, they elongated. Transparent, they contracted. Star-spirals every-which-way. Nothing to them, not a sound or thought, and the planet below them and above a cloudy rope. Then they went everywhere. And all black.

Still.

Khreng snarled, "That is something new GalFed does not trouble to inform us ignorant Ungrukh."

They were landed, evening sky in the viewer.

"No," Prandra said. "The ESP is unconscious. Something is wrong."

"Dead?"

"No. The blood supply is cut off and comes back."

"That is much quicker than the other landings and much more unpleasant."

"I tell you something is wrong! Espinoza!"

:What? what?:

"What is happening?"

:You're asking me?:

"Who else do we ask? You are the ESP. Are you hurt?"

:What have I got to hurt? If I had a head I'd have a headache.":

"Espinoza! What is happening?"

:Something picked us up and put us down. You tell me.:

"I look and you esp," said Prandra.

:Trees, land, sky. . .that's good to know. We seem to be in a blackberry patch. Give me latitude and longitude.:

"51'30" N, 20'17" E. Where is that?"

Espinoza considered. *:About halfway between Lublin and Warsaw. . .:*

"But what does that mean, Espinoza?"

:We're in Poland, not far from Warsaw, where Joe Wisnicki comes from, and mother and child are doing well, with congratulations. Only half a world off course.:

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"You are making some kind of game."

:No, I'm not. It's nothing serious, we're down safely, we just went off course.:

Khreng said, "The course record is the same as on the indicator." He played the taped directions from Fiji Station. "I make no mistakes."

:Raise them on Fiji then, nudnik!:

After a moment, Khreng said, "There is nothing anywhere on the band. Static only. No disrepair indicated."

:Try the ship computer.:

"There is no answer, Espinoza."

It was growing dark. The evening star rose in the viewer.

We are on Earth... the thought was a whisper, a mutter...finally he said,: *Hypnoform the shuttle compatible with surroundings—if it's working.:*

The hypnoformer was not exactly a cloak of invisibility; it generated a hypnotic field around a person or object that convinced the viewer that he was seeing something else entirely, and was useful for contact with fearful or suspicious aliens. Khreng set dials, knobs, switches. The machine was built into the bulkhead; a growl began in its base, rose gradually to a whine and then a sound beyond hearing; in the distance, dogs were barking... "It's working," Khreng said. The barking stopped; the sound had reached its peak of silence.

:With our luck it could just be pretending to work.:

With real luck the shuttle had blended into its surroundings and was invisible to all external eyes. "You expect enemies?"

:No...not yet.:

"Then let's go out and greet the friendly natives." Khreng didn't mean that literally but as a gesture of solidarity with an ally, a custom of his tribe, to show that he had no fear, and he made it because he sensed fear in Espinoza. A brain in a bowl is not supposed to be able to feel or fear, but a glandular body might impose certain ineradicable habits on its brain over seventy-seven years of existence.

"You say the Solthrees have death bullets," Prandra said.

:Children, it's more complicated than that...:

"What then?"

:We'll scan and find out.:

No person lives in this thicket, hermit or woodcutter; there is not enough for him, nothing to attract even Khreng and Prandra, hungry as they are for meat. But there are many small animals: birds above, then squirrels, chipmunks, a few pheasants and rabbits, a bat

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swooping, flittering moths; and below, moles, grubs, worms. And insects, smaller and smaller sparks of life, each emits its own whisper. Life proliferates helplessly wherever it touches, and even on Ungruwarkh, where it has to make an effort, there are many forms beyond the microscope. But on Sol-three, officially designated a Mother-of-Worlds by GalFed, the noise of life currents is almost deafening to a telepath.

"I don't know that I like it here," Prandra said.

:And I can't promise you will, either.:

Beyond the woods a stream with a few unremarkable fish; beyond that a village. . .

:No power, they aren't using power. . .:

"If there is no radio working—"

:There can't be a power blackout over the whole—no planes in the sky, no—check radiation.:

"Nothing beyond normal."

:Then it's not a war. . .:

Prandra's fur stood on end, and Khreng said, "Stop that. You are making me feel ill."

"I am not as brave as you, big man," Prandra said, and pulled her mind away.

"What you are thinking. . .," Khreng said to Espinoza, and his voice lowered till he sounded like a tiger with bronchitis, ". . .at GalFed Central they tell me there is no such thing as time travel. . ."

Three hundred and twenty-four people live in the village. Two will soon die and three more hope to be born; the rest are making a tremendous earthly din: to the Ungrukh, who don't talk much and have fine-tuned ears, it is fearsome, even strained through Espinoza's mind. Women are banging pots, yelling at quarreling children; merchants bargain with farmers, all weary now, they want to go home to supper; boys fight in the dusty streets, are pulled apart and slapped; in the House of Prayer forty-odd men and boys are making extravagant promises to God and demanding Heaven and Earth in return; at the village's northern rim, farthest away, the blacksmith is shoeing the last mare of the day—there's a piece of meat for you!—and the distant *tink* of his hammer is almost peaceful. . . .

"What language are they speaking?"

:Yiddish, mostly.:

"I am told nothing of that one. Is it spoken by many?"

:Nobody. It died almost a hundred years before I was born. . .I took my Hebrew lessons from the grandson of the last Yiddish scholar. . .:

"But just for this reason you cannot be sure—"

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:Let me tell you. . .: Espinoza pulled his mind back into the silent boundary of the little ship. *:At GalFed you heard that we don't use time travel, not that we don't have it. There was a device built right on Solthree: a fifty-two-year-old man was sent back fifty years. They brought him forward again well enough, in good shape—except that he had a bad case of diaper rash, a compulsion to suck his thumb, and no memory of anything that happened.:*

"Then it is useless," Khreng said.

:It is to us.:

"But there is somebody else that uses it," Prandra said. "You are thinking of the Qumedni. . .and of the Qumedon ship in orbit, the one that burnt out the ESP."

"That's right.:

"You cannot be sure of that."

:Not until we find out much more. Just the same, I think they may have set up a time-vortex here.:

The Qumedni make their home in the Galaxy, but they don't belong to GalFed. They don't need to; they have so many talents, powers and dominions that they hardly know what to do with them, and sometimes they make mischief. Most of the time they coexist peacefully with GalFed and occasionally even make contact, trade bits of information and warnings of local conditions for small souvenir items they consider quaint. No one has ever seen a Qumedon or wants to; perhaps they are pure energy forms: they surely have a repellent field about them, and their powers are so supremely discomfiting that the more one knows about them the less one wants to know.

They travel back and forth in time as they please, shape the worlds of their dominions to their fancy, set up their time-vortices where they choose. One concession GalFed managed to wring from them was an agreement to set up a warning signal around every vortex.

"There is no warning," said Prandra. "We come straight down without even stirring the leaves."

"And in one-tenth the time," Khreng added. "That at least is good."

:. . .And a Qumedni ship burning out an ESP, behaving like an enemy—though they've never exactly been friends. Perhaps some kind of renegade. . .:

"Tell us what to do, then Espinoza, and what time we are in."

:Listen. . .listen to the people. . .:

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Ten zlotys is nine zlotys too many for such, what did you expect, gold with bells around it? didn't I tell you (slap) not to (slap) climb trees? what can I help it if, leave off already, how can I study when, where did you put, I told him and told him and he went, tell me what do you want from my grey hairs, hah? tell me? *oy Zevi, oy Zevi, what did you do that you should die?*

"This is a hard place, it's hard," Prandra whispered. "Everyone here is hurt and bent, even the children. . .except for that blacksmith, maybe."

:And he's a bit of a simpleton.:

"Like the people of Ungruwarkh, Espinoza?" Khreng asked with a fanged grin. He was neither hurt nor bent.

:I'll tell you, if the Ungrukh break off relations with GalFed and stay on Ungruwarkh and starve, they might possibly escape getting bent.:

They waited, crouching like hearth cats in their small space.

Among the people of the village no one clear voice rises to describe itself in terms of time and the world. But it is night, they close their mouths, bite their tongues if they have to, fold away their grievances. *Tomorrow is erev Shabbas, tomorrow, tomorrow. . .*A few students read by candlelight, the black letters shimmer on the white paper like the flames of their candles, the rest lie down on beds, cots, feather tickings, most of them trembling with weariness, and sleep. Rats and mice scuttle among the weathered timbers of the houses; a stray pig grunts in the street (and Prandra's ears twitch, her eyes sparkle. . .)

A voice, in a small tuneless song, quavers on the light wind:

"Chava, shtel' dem samovar, ai lyu lyu, ai lyu lyu;
Chava, shtel' dem samovar, ai lyu, lyu!"

The rabbi is sweeping the synagogue. He is thinking of hot tea with lemon, his wife's hands around the samovar, her family's treasure. . . .

Espinoza fishes deftly, not to disturb, comes up with a name: Eliohu ben Shmuel Greenblatt, big name for a thin little man, about forty, looks much older, thick grey in the hair and beard—so call me Reb' Elya, everybody else does, I'm not proud! He sings:

"Come children, drink the Rabbi's grace
and eat his Sabbath bread;
the wisdom shining in his face
will multiply in light and place
its crown on every head!"

That's not me! I'm not wise, and my beard is full of sweat.

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All right, but why is the rabbi sweeping up?

Espinoza gave Reb' Elya's neural connections a nudge. Even a humble village like—what's it called? Kostopol?—even Kostopol should be able to afford a shammis to take care of the shul.

Reb' Elya turned silent, rested chin on hands clasped around the broom handle and watched the lamplight flickering on the walls. An uneasiness which the merchants, scholars, workaday people had managed to push down below the level of consciousness rose in him like a bloated thing surfacing out of the depths of a pond.

The shammis is dead, that's why! Dead for no reason. Zevi-Hirsch Dorfman, a little sour apple of a man who never opened his mouth except to curse his life and the lives of his wife and children, had flown into a fury at Janchik, the big peasant boy who helped the blacksmith. For what? Janchik, a sleepy good-humored farmer's son who had drunk tea often enough at Reb' Elya's table, and who hardly ever got drunk—liquor made him even sleepier—had started shouting in the middle of the street, things about poisoned wells and Christian blood used in Jewish rituals, things no one would have suspected seeping into his mind let alone coming from his mouth. And Zevi, with Passover coming in midweek, had opened up a mouth back at him; and Janchik had clenched his huge fist and killed him with a blow. Last night, at the end of the evening. . . .

The street had cleared like dust beneath a broom, and when they had all crept back an hour later in the silence, the darkness, the body was lying there in the mud, flat as it had fallen, a pig rooting in its belly. . . .

Even for Kostopol it was not a pogrom, but—

Reb' Elya shook his head, swept and sang:

"For all of time you long to fly,
you build a pair of wings;
and in one teardrop of his eye
the Rabbi sails across the sky
to meet the King of Kings. . ."

Reb' Elya giggled. "Wings, wings! Sweep, wings!" he told the flying broom. Dust obeyed him.

The shul is a small humble place, dusty, the windows are dim, and there is no obligation to make it a shining Temple when you can never own the land it rests on, but Passover begins Tuesday night, there is no time to elect another shammis with the usual politicking, and Zevi had a habit of hoarding cheese rinds and bread crusts in the cupboards and on the shelves behind the volumes

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of the Talmud; Passover uses no bread. Besides, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak of Lublin, the great Seer, will be staying over this Sabbath on his way home from visiting disciples all around the country. . . .

Espinoza said, *:Early nineteenth century Poland, things were fairly quiet, maybe early Alexander the First. . .:*

"Explain, Espinoza, what is this?"

:A village of Jewish merchants and traders surrounded by Polish farms. Look, I was a Solthree historian, but I don't know everything that happened on Earth, and I was a Jew, am a Jew, so you know something of what that is—but these are Eastern European Jews and my ancestors were from Spain; I don't know everything that's going on here because the speech and customs are not all the same as I learned.:

Prandra said, "They are disagreeable people. I think they are screaming prayers even in their dreams."

:They think they have a direct line to God and they want to keep it open.:

Prandra sniffed. The Ungrukh living on the temperate plains were very possessive about their volcanoes, where the Firemasters they worshiped had their dwelling places.

Now the shul was clean, for the demons and dybbuks who slept there after midnight. Reb' Elya flung his broom in the corner and listened, half fearful, for the whisper of Lilith on the wind, for ghosts scuttling in the beams, chirping and scampering in the rafters. The dogs had set up a furious barking a short time before, and he wondered what wandering soul had aroused them. Oy, Zevi-Hirsch . . .he sighed and sang again:

"Whatever price the Czars may claim
he praises One alone;
the Rabbi sings the Holy Name
and laughing, climbs the steps of flame
to sit beside God's throne. . ."

Ai, ai! He sang:

"You, Reb' Elya, know no Names
you, Reb' Elya, are an ignoramus
you have your Rebbetsin,
and your Rebbelach,
and your samovar, bim, bam!"

He blew out the lamp, closed and locked the door behind him, and went home to the Rebbetsin, rosy-cheeked Chava, and to the Rebbelach, four little boys who slept tumbled together on the bed in the corner, side curls tossed out over the featherbed or lying along their cheeks and trembling with their breaths.

And to the samovar, bim, bam!

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A weary thought: sleep/home/twilight from Espinoza. He gathered, directed himself to the matter at hand:

:I think we've been sent backward about seven hundred and fifty years. I take the number from local conditions, and from Reb' Elya's thought of the Lubliner Rabbi who was well known around here in the early nineteenth century. . .:

"Could all this be something like the 'plains-companion'?" Prandra asked; she was thinking of the hallucinations that sometimes plagued lonely hunters on Ungruwarkh.

:Not with three hundred and twenty-four complete and distinct people, as well as all the animal life. . .and a natural time-warp only turns up in deep space under conditions that are extreme and peculiar. No, I think the Qumedon has set up a time-vortex, and it's pulled us in. He may be some kind of renegade or criminal among his own people; the hostility and the lack of warning seem to go together. Sometimes a Qumedni ship won't answer a message, but it almost never attacks the sender.:

"You think the Qumedon is down here?"

:We got dumped here. If there's a Qumedon, I don't know where else he'd be.:

"Do you really believe in that Qumedon, Espinoza?" Khreng asked quietly. "I think you are only trying to give us hope where there is none."

:What can I say? Assume there's a Qumedon and a vortex. If we came down in it, we have to go up in it. I don't think his shuttle would have enough power; it's probably generated by the mother ship—and he could go off with his vortex and leave us. Or he's gone. So much for hope.:

"There is no sign of aliens here."

:Except us. . .still, the shammis and the blacksmith's boy behaved out of character, and that's typical of Qumedni mischief.:

"It is also typical of many peoples in every time and place," Khreng said dryly.

:Yes, but it's really odd that Zevi-Hirsch went into such a rage.:

"What is strange about a man fighting back?"

:When your method of survival among hostile and suspicious people is to keep the peace at all costs—it's lethal—but so are Qumedni.:

"All right, Espinoza," Prandra said. "You convince us we must look for a Qumedon. Or more than one."

:You realize that if he's here he's hostile, and he can esp you but you can't esp him. He may have taken on the shape of a Solthree.:

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"I go scouting and find that out."

"No, you do not," said Khreng. "I am the one to go out, and you can read me back here."

"You know that's not close enough for good cross-readings."

"I am going! Otherwise you are giving me hell and blazes for bringing you across the Galaxy for nothing."

"Oh, you always think you must be the big man just because you are first out to meet the GalFed surveyor team."

"That's right," said Khreng. "And it goes very well, too."

"Because the rest of the tribe is together waiting to jump out!"

"You are only thinking of that pig running around the streets!"

"Of course. I come here with the promise of meat and a great deal of knowledge from wise teachers, and I am stuck in an iron box with death and dog food!" She lashed her tail, endangering everything in the vicinity. "I must get out!"

"See? There are the hell and blazes already."

:Oh for God's sake be quiet, you pair of actors! You're sending my blood pressure up.:

"The pump is working perfectly," said Khreng.

Prandra said, "Look, Khreng, on Ungruwarkh I am your choice because I am a good ESP and know where to hunt. You are mine because you are clever and strong and build well. Here it is a case of being an ESP and knowing where to hunt."

"You cannot esp a Qumedon."

"When the valley people come to raid us with that spy who cannot be esped, do I find him or not?"

Khreng grunted.

:You cross-checked. . .:

"Only go round them, I can shield a little, and make a network, because each is known to so many others, and finally there is one the others know whom I cannot esp. I must be out near them; I cannot do that from this place."

:A Qumedon can take almost any shape.:

"If it is not a Solthree, we find that out and try something else."

"I wait for you outside the ship," Khreng said, determined to salvage something. "If you are in trouble, I am not wasting time fiddling with lock-doors to come after you."

"I am always grateful for help," Prandra said complacently.

:And luck,: said Espinoza.

The planet teemed with strange odors. Khreng's and

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Prandra's were not among them; they had decontaminated and deodorized so that the local animals wouldn't jump in the air at one sniff of them. They had nose filters to lower the oxygen to its level on their own planet, but there was more life there, more to smell: earth, air, water, animals, men. . . .

Espinoza had said: *:You should hypnoform into a Solthree, or at least a blackberry bush, make yourself inconspicuous. . .:*

"Espinoza, as a Solthree I must go on two legs and I get nowhere; in my own shape, if someone sees me—well, the people here believe in demons, and whatever they are, I am not far from what they look like—so they say, 'Oh, God help me, there goes a demon!' and shiver and say their prayers. If they see a blackberry bush running by in the street, they think they are going crazy and start screaming. Forget it!"

She left Khreng hidden in the shadows; opened her mind, her senses; padded easily among the thickets, tail curled around her rump to avoid breaking branches, could feel her shoulder blades, her haunch bones working freely under her skin in the cool air.

She crossed the stream and the dirty road and went up the village street. Houses clustered at either side, and it widened at midpoint into the marketplace; the synagogue was here, and it sheltered bats and mice; if there were demons, she missed them. The pig was here too, grunting among the burdock, thinking of sleep. In a while it would get more than it wanted; she passed it without a glance. She was not wearing her harness with its civilized implements, only a belt with a pouch and a knife.

Back on Ungruwarkh the thought of coming across the Galaxy had not dismayed her, but she had been disturbed at the prospect of going among so many beings, not of her species, who had so much flesh on them. Down among them she found it was not their flesh that disturbed her but their noisy heads. Being with Espinoza had prepared her for complex multilayered minds; now she was surrounded by hundreds of them, dreaming and weeping; their bodies were only unregarded appendages. She thought it might be more pleasant to make the acquaintance of some of Solthree's big cats, even if they were a bit backward.

She went round the houses, silent, twitching her tail, not understanding all she picked up, leaving Espinoza to sort and collate; plucked out one thread of identity and another and another, tying knots of relationship in them.

A thin current of odor from

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dough for the Sabbath bread, rising on warm stoves, flowed about her; one more strange smell among thousands for an Ungrukh who knew nothing of cooking except sometimes to roast those detestable fish.

Fish and edible birds were being stored here too, in cool places. . .there was a lot of food in the little house of Zevi-Hirsch's widow Tsippe, whose neighbors had provided for her: she was asleep, salt crust on her cheeks;

(What is that?) *(tears: weeping/grief)* (for that mean little man? does he leave her then without provision?) *(she helps support the family taking in sewing—make-and-mend-clothing—because the sexton gets more honor than pay)* she sniffed (what an honor)

The one whose helper started it all, Shloimeh the blacksmith, sometimes called King Solomon, Shloimeh-ha-Melech, because he was a bit of a fool: snoring happily beside his wife (bleeding? blood?) *(she's menstruating, too bad, so he's—hoo, what a sinner!—dreaming of dancing a kazatzka with)* the servant girl who worked for

Reb Zalman Dorfman *(the Rich Man, cousin to Zevi-Hirsch Dorfman the poor man)* who was taking in the Lubliner Rebbeh for the Sabbath; wondering how to impress him, for a rich man in Kostopol was not much better than a poor man in Lublin. . .turning his mind away from the death, the funeral, the weeping widow (fear, discomfort—don't be scared, big man, she's not planning to beg). Prandra passed him by with a last wisp of throught: idiot rabbi. . .still, the cantor (prayer-singer? oh, like the rabbi in the synagogue —not much better than an Ungrukh). . .the cantor

Nachman Klein, had a fine voice, doubled as (slitting throat of an animal? blood again?) *(ritual slaughterer)* (don't bother explaining), was dreaming of singing in a fine synagogue in Warsaw (wearing no clothes?) *(typical Solthree dream)* (if you say so). . .his demon daughter Sheyndl, a tough little girl, wakeful, sucked her braid and planned to drive a goat into shul one Sabbath in the middle of the most tearful and dramatic part of *Ribono shel olom*. . .(poor man). . .and

Reb' Elya, the innocent, dream rising from him in a perfect sphere of light, wearing a white silk caftan and embroidered yarmulkeh, broke the Sabbath bread at the table of the wise and the holy. . .

(nothing here. . .tomorrow three boys come home for Sabbath from the? yeshiva, and some others. . .)

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:All right,: said Espinoza. *:Come back.:*

:About that pig. . .: she had a sting of conscience. *:Does it belong to someone here?:*

:Jews don't eat it. It does belong to someone, but I guess it could drop dead anytime from disease or old age. Give it a merciful end and hurry back. Don't eat any till it's irradiated.:

She found the pig drinking from the stream, stunned it with a blow of her tail before it could squeal, dragged it through the water into the thicket, dug a pit with her claws, used the knife to slash its throat; the blood sprang into the pit—

:You'd also make a good kosher butcher,: said Espinoza.

—And the entrails followed; she covered them over, stamped down the earth, took a film sack from her pouch and packed the meat in, sealed it. . .

And felt a most peculiar sensation at the back of her neck. The fur rose.

Espinoza asked, *:What's that?:*

:I don't know.: She put down the package and stood still. Nothing but the night and its small noises. Her pulse was steady. . .and a little tingling went along her nerves, a physical sensation raising her hairs of their own will.

:Some kind of radiation?. . .a force field?:

:I go look.:

:Take care,: said Khreng.

:No!: Espinoza called. *:Come back!:*

She disregarded them, crossed the stream, and stood at the edge of the road. This way Lublin? That way Warsaw? She didn't know which. She chose a direction and walked, meter by meter; early spring night, branches studded with leaf buds against a dull sky; and the moon, finding a space between clouds, silvered the air for a moment, but there was nothing to see in its light.

The small tingling intensified, spread over her body; the air trembled as in a heat wave, then rippled and warped; the skin was writhing over her muscles.

:Don't—: Espinoza was whispering (something); but she was not afraid, did not feel under personal attack or in the presence of an enemy, only intensely interested, able to turn back at any time, and went deliberately toward that strengthening source, out of all contact with Khreng and Espinoza, padding down the silent road at midnight in a deafening silence.

She stopped, not knowing or wondering why, very still in the center of her being, though every hair of her body was on end, the knife burned against her side, her skin writhed and

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swirled over her body like an oil film on water.

A small whiteness spread behind her eyes, grew till it blinded her, went down every nerve, into every tooth, set her brain on fire. She sprang up on her hind legs, savaged the air with her claws briefly, and fell into blackness.

Khreng was pawing, pushing, growling at her.

"Where is this?" she whispered.

"One kilometer from the village, where do you think?" he grumbled. "You are a great traveler."

She lay panting. Whatever she had run into was gone, but she ached from the crown of her head right down her spine to the tip of her tail.

:Are you all right?: The image of Espinoza, quick swarthy man, touched her on the head, lightly. *:Are you all right?:*

"I am stupid."

"There you are not mistaken." Khreng pulled at her this way and that, heaved her on his back, her head lolled as if her neck were broken, her legs hung. "You are damn heavy." She was as limp as a trophy skin.

He headed back toward the shuttle at a slow trot, the piston-bones of his shoulders moved beneath her jaw. In a great effort she stretched her neck, touched the tip of her tongue to the hairs in his ear. "Don't forget the meat," she whispered, and fainted.

She came to again in her couch in the shuttle. Khreng was rubbing down her sides and back with his pads, lightly oiled. "Now who is playing at great heroics, ha? I come looking and find you with your hair all on end as if you are struck by lightning."

"I am struck by lightning," she said sleepily.

:You sure you feel better?:

"I don't ache so much now. Do I find the Qumedon?" Khreng brought her a cup of warm herb tea, one of the few vegetable products Ungrukh enjoyed, and she lapped at it.

:Not exactly. You ran into his shuttle's energy field. He was starting up the engines.:

"Why don't I turn back?"

:There was nothing you could do against it. It paralyzes the nervous system, like a GalFed stunner, only this can be lethal.:

"Is he gone then?"

:I don't think so. From what I could see through Khreng, there was no blast-off, and there wasn't a cutoff as if he'd been sucked into his time-warp. It increased gradually and died down the same way. I suppose he was testing.:

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"Does he esp me?"

:I don't know. He's not too far away.:

Prandra sniffed. "He's no Kostopoler."

:He may become one yet—and you certainly will. Tomorrow you'll both practice two-legged walking; if you want any chance of leaving this place, you'll have to hypnoform, get out there and find him.:

And suppose they found him, what then? Espinoza was grateful that Khreng and Prandra didn't ask silly questions like that.

Prandra didn't dream often, but perhaps she was stimulated by all the minds she had been esping. She found herself running shoulder to shoulder with Khreng across the red plains, as they had done often enough on Ungruwarkh. Tugrik and Emerald on their backs, each one a small warm weight with little claws prickling into the skin. And Espinoza, a young brown-skinned man with black hair and white teeth, quick-tempered and sharp-witted, was running lightly between them—how, when they were touching?—seemed to be blended half into each, with a hand resting on each of their necks, laughing. Was it her dream alone, or one she was sharing with Khreng? Or Espinoza?

Friday morning they were up early; Espinoza had not slept. *:Everybody tells me I don't need sleep. Liars.:* His consciousness had been lowered by drugs for the Jump, but at his age they were too dangerous to use regularly. *:Anyway, this is my last trip.:*

"What do you do afterward, then?" Khreng was stalking stiffly about on two legs, preparing to hypnoform into a Solthree. He and Prandra were going to be a pair of travelers stopping over in Kostopol for the Sabbath. For some vague reason, possibly tribal conditioning in conformity, he felt all this business was unnatural and immoral.

:Not more so than coming across the Galaxy in the first place.:

"In the first place, I am better to stay home and die fighting."

"What do you say you do after you go back. Espinoza?" Prandra asked.

:Get put into some library think-tank as part of historical reference. Students come round, ask, "How long did the Thirty Years' War last?" That kind of thing. I'm too old to travel any more. . .you've got to get that tail curled up or you'll look like a pretty damn funny Solthree.:

"It's a meter and a half long, Espinoza. Do I chop it off?"

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:No, but you, Prandra, will have to chop off your whiskers. No use swearing. Solthree women just don't have long red bristles sprouting out of their faces.:

Friday morning everybody gets up early. Chava and Braina and Freyda and Reisel and nearly a hundred other women jump out of bed while their husbands are still groaning and snorting with the misery of waking; wash hands, pull on old dresses, tie aprons, kerchiefs, flick the cloth off the risen dough, punch it down and turn it over to rise again. It smells like life, like a baby's flesh. . . .

Reb' Elya gnaws a crust, gulps tea, grabs shawl and phylacteries, and runs to shul. There is a film of dream around him yet, like a bubble ready to burst.

It never quite bursts, only rises and floats above him like a balloon on a string. Reb' Elya does not live in a bubble; he runs so that the damp from the early rain will not soak his old shoes, mud splashes his tattered caftan; supported by an impoverished congregation, he is a "poor man in seven edges," as they say in the shtetl, and he clasps to his breast the tallith and tefillin in their velvet drawstring bags so they will not be spattered.

:Stop and eat now.: Espinoza said. *:But don't gorge or you'll be sleepy.:* He enjoyed watching Reb' Elya, resting along his consciousness.

Espinoza was interested in psychodynamics, not physical or emotional privacies; he was not a voyeur, only an enforced observer of sentient life. He had a great fondness for Khreng and Prandra: they were fierce, quick, direct, integrated; their conjoined mind was a crystal globe without bubble or ripple; Reb' Elya's was faceted, asymmetrical, flawed and striated with pressures. Many parts of it were painful, some silly, some fine qualities blocked and thwarted by circumstance, and all of it fascinating. Sometimes Espinoza wished he had been a first-grade ESP, could have had a ready insight into the psychological structures he had to build with so much time and effort. Sometimes, but not often. First-grade ESPs dealt with medical and psychiatric problems in many kinds of life-forms; a five-star ESP who could think like a psychotic decapod from Arcturus IV was as uncomfortable to be around as a Qumedon.

Reb' Elya pulled the string with the synagogue key from round his neck and unlocked the door. He knocked to warn demons, and opened it. A bat flew out. Reb' Elya smiled and

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called out half seriously, "Good day, Ashmedai!" But the demon-king did not hear, or did not choose to answer. Elya slipped inside, whispering as always, "Lord, I love Your house, the place where Your glory lives. . ."

Khreng and Prandra ate cubed meat out of bowls, licking their jaws and grunting with pleasure.

Espinoza said, *:We have tapes for English, French, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish. Unfortunately the languages you need are Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew. What I don't know I'll pick up and feed you.:*

"Eat now, think later," said Khreng.

:Think now, because you don't know what the Qumedon will do, or when. Remember: the rabbi doesn't like to speak Polish, the women don't know Hebrew, the scholars don't read or write Yiddish.:

"You remember," Khreng growled. "I become a deaf-and-dumb Solthree."

Reb' Elya shook out the folds of his tallith and wrapped it round him. Having blessed this act, he sat down to wait for his quorum. Some of his congregation would be saying prayers at Tsippe's for the last day of Kaddish and enjoying a bagel and a little schnapps too; a couple of schnorrers, who went where the food was, Shloimeh ha-Melech likewise, Reb Nachman and Reb Zalman who were important. . . He could count on the company of Mordcha Pipick, whose huge belly was caused by a tumor, not by appetite. . . He had a brain wave: he would use his small authority to appoint Mordcha temporary shammis . . . "How can we do without a shammis over Pesach and with the Lubliner coming? Who'd complain? Who'd worry he'd hang on too long? Except for that pipick of his the man's thin as a pipe-stem, and, God be merciful, I think he'll soon be—oh."

Oh. The soul drained out of his body leaving Reb' Elya white as his tallith. Words said themselves:

HE'LL SOON BE DEAD HE'LL SOON BE DEAD HE'LL SOON BE DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD

:Oh. . .oh. . .:

Khreng belched and scratched his belly with the tip of his tail, but Prandra cried, "Espinoza! What is it?"

There was a whimpering in Espinoza's mind. *:Dead. Dead. Oh, I don't know. Oh God. Tell me if there's something happening in the village. Quick!:*

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Prandra scanned. "Twenty-three people are vomiting; eleven babies have begun to scream; seven men, thirteen women, and eighteen prepubic children have burst into tears; two old men and one woman have pain in the chest and trouble breathing; fifteen assorted people have headaches."

:And Reb' Elya?:

"The rabbi. . .has fainted."

Reb' Elya opened his eyes, pulled himself up to his knees, and began to weep. He gathered the fringes at the four corners of his shawl and kissed them with trembling hands picked up the phylacteries, which he had pulled down in his fall, and kissed them as well.

"Blessed Lord our God King of the Universe, what have I done? Why have You struck me down? Lord of the Universe, did I sin when I said that Reb Mordcha would die? Perhaps the Evil Urge made me call him to the attention of the Angel of Death? Spare the life of Your servant Mordcha, O Lord our God and forgive me, forgive me!"

Still weeping, still trembling in every limb, he pulled himself to his feet and began to wind tefillin, straining with all of his will not to drop or tangle them, crying out the prayers through chattering teeth:

"On the arm in memory of His outstretched arm, opposite the heart to subject our hearts to His service, opposite the brain to subject all faculties to His service, blessed be He. . . bring me long life and holy thoughts, and free me from the Evil Urge. . ."

"Solthrees live half again as long as Ungrukh, and they are still afraid of death," said Prandra.

:I am not afraid of death,: said Espinoza with asperity. *:I have already died once. Something has constricted the cerebral vessels of everyone around here. Didn't you feel anything?:*

"A bit dull and sleepy. . ."

:You have a high metabolic rate, and you've just eaten heavily; that may be why you missed it. Turn up my oxygen a bit.:

"Can you do anything for them?"

:Plant a suggestion that they'd feel better with some fresh air. It's passing off already. The men will be praying, and that will get the air in their lungs. That was a very unpleasant feeling.:

"What causes it?" Khreng asked.

:Who would you suggest? Who do you know in the district with power to do that?:

"We don't do that," said Khreng, with what for him was

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a great deal of forbearance. "There is no need to be sarcastic."

:Sorry. I guess it's the effect.:

The people of Kostopol did not quite know what had happened to them, or realize it had happened to all of them. It was variously a sudden unease, nausea, depression, fear, headache, shortness of breath. . .a something. And it went away. Not quite. A thing, perhaps as small as a sand grain, perhaps as large as a flake of stone, remained. Lodged beneath the skin, or behind the eye, or back of the throat, or under the breastbone. . . .

The quorum who had been saying Kaddish for Zevi-Hirsch came out of Tsippe's house in a peculiar frame of mind. They had eaten bagels and hard-boiled eggs, and had drunk schnapps, and the food knotted in their bellies and the liquor burned. . . .They did not speak much, and for them this was as if the world had turned upside down and day become night. They came raggedly across the marketplace, blinking, though there was no sun, scratching their necks, though there were no flies; bearing toward the smithy where Shloimeh would leave them.

On the farther side, Janchik had just turned off the road and was shambling toward his day's work; sleepy-eyed, grinning foolishly, big shoulders swinging and coarse red hands hanging loosely.

They watched him.

That fist of his had gone crack! so, and the little man had fallen, scraggy beard jutting at the sky. . . .

"Big loshek, what he did. . ."

"I don't know what got into him—"

"But you keep him around!"

"Give him meals, yet. . ."

"When he ought to be—"

"Yes, he ought to be. . ."

"—No justice—"

"Why don't we?"

"He's big, but—

"—Ten of us—"

"And—"

"Do something about it for once, instead of—"

"Why not?"

It was strange that they did not look at each other and ask if God would wither their tongues.

:I think they've gone mad,: said Espinoza. *:They're planning to kill him.:*

From the other road approaching the village, a horse-drawn cart and driver were bringing Count Rosnicki, the landowner, to collect the black mare he had left at the smithy to be shod the day before. Riding behind him were a group

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of cousins from Warsaw who were staying with him over Easter, and he was going to show them his stables and his lands and his budding orchards and everything else that made for good country living. He was in a relaxed good humor, a state he could sometimes maintain for more than ten minutes.

The two parties were converging on that hapless Janchik, and Espinoza's mind hummed like a bee swarm with useless alternatives. *:God help them. . .:*

"Let us out, Espinoza."

:Half an hour apiece to hypnoform and ten minutes for the lock-doors.:

"We go without hypnoforming."

:And make a big red target. . .Lord, I wish I'd never been born.:

Khreng and Prandra looked at the blue globe, and at each other.

Reb' Elya came out of shul, like the minyan, in a very uncomfortable frame of mind. He did not know why it should have seemed so sinful, just at that moment, to think of Mordcha as a dying man, since he and everyone else knew he was. . .Elya pulled at the strings of his fringed undergarment, the minor tallith, as if the knots would undo themselves and solve his perplexity. He went across the market without seeing the minyan moving forward with death in its heart, or the count rounding the corner in a magisterial cloud of dust, driver beating the whipstock against his thigh.

Elya looked up and saw only Janchik, and his brow cleared. Surely the best way to be forgiven was to forgive. Blind to everything else, he hurried over to the shambling boy and plucked at his sleeve. "Janchik!" he cried. "Come have a glass of tea with me!"

Janchik blinked down at him, smiling. "I'd like that, Rebbeh, but I have to go to work now."

"Take a few minutes. . ."

The minyan stopped short; Elya noticed them from the corner of his eye and turned his head. He saw two merchants, a blacksmith, a schoolmaster, a cantor/slaughterer, a cobbler, a carpenter, and three schnorrers. "Nachman," he called, "I have an idea, I want to talk to you. . .what's the matter?"

The ten looked at each other and saw much in each others' eyes. Their faces burned. "Nothing. . .nothing is wrong," the cantor said, choking. . . .

The galloping cart pulled up to them in a shower of dust.

:Very close, very close,: said Espinoza.

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"Gut Shabbas, Rebbeh," the count said. It was a little early in the day for this greeting, but it was the only Yiddish he knew.

"Good day, Count," Reb' Elya said civilly. The count was no aristocrat in bearing, but a stocky, ruddy countryman, strong and glossy as his horses. His shrewd slit eyes glittered with ironic and capricious humor; he was not a wicked man, only nerve-rackingly unpredictable. The previous summer he had sent a couple of men to knock the cobbler around over the quality of the leather used in repairing his boots; a few days later he had sent the same men beating the bushes to find Elya's Moisheleh, who had gotten lost picking berries.

Elya did not even dislike the count, but he was so far from Elya's model of what a man ought to be; i.e., pale, with side curls and beard, black hat and caftan—that he found him totally alien.

The count said, "Feliks tells me his favorite sow didn't come home last night, the beautiful Sasha." He laughed. "I told him you wouldn't know where she is, but she likes to be around you so much I thought I'd ask."

Sasha? The stupid animal that rooted in Kostopol's vegetable plots? Tsk. Elya kept the glint out of his eye and said quietly, "No, Count, I haven't seen her." He added, "The children tease the pigs but they never harm them."

The count laughed again and jumped down to collect his horse. Reb' Elya looked round for Nachman, but the minyan had scattered. He sighed and turned homeward. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea? He stopped in midstride and clapped his hands: of course! that's why I was so upset. I was turning Mordcha's illness to my own advantage, choosing a dying man so no one would complain. . .yes, I see it quite clearly—but God forgive me! we still need a shammis. . .

:Now you know what you ate,: said Espinoza. *:The beautiful Sasha.:*

Khreng licked his jaws with his long rasp tongue. "I agree about her beauty."

"It's a pity Rosnicki is not the Qumedon," Prandra said, "nor his people."

:He's not far away now. . . I've heard of a quorum of ten exorcising a dybbuk but never of any that was possessed by one.:

The fish are cut and simmering, spiced, in their pots; the women have dismembered and soaked and salted the chickens and put them on to boil; they punch down the

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dough, slap it on floured boards, divide and divide it, roll it in strips, braid and set it to rise for the last time.

The boys come home from yeshiva for the Sabbath and the Passover week, bringing friends whose homes are far away; they carry packs filled with threadbare clothes and books with raveled leaves; they march, unregimented, side curls bouncing, singing songs to ancient Biblical verses; they are seized upon, their cheeks are pinched, to cries of "What are they feeding you, you got so thin?" None of their translucent spirits harbors a Qumedon.

Khreng and Prandra buckled on their harnesses, tucked away dozens of implements, clipped remote switches for the hypnoformer on their forearms, took tranquilizers because it was their mating season, put on tinted contact lenses to counteract the harsher rays of Sol.

:Your names are Jacob (my Hebrew name) and Sara, let's see, Katz—why not?—on your way from. . .Krasniewic—I just made it up—to Warsaw, because, oh, because your mother's dying, your brother's been kidnaped into the army, and you have to buy him off, and—and your father's in jail for not paying taxes.:

"What a life," said Khreng. "How do I earn my keep?"

:Buy a little, sell a little, mend a little. The usual.:

"You must admit I have a very strange accent."

:That's the way they talk in Krasniewic,: said Espinoza. *:The first person you see, you'll ask where you can stay over the Sabbath. Somebody will find you a place.:*

The Sabbath loaves, risen at last into the shapes of cumulus clouds, are glazed with egg and put into the ovens. . . .

Hypnoforming an object is one thing. Hypnoforming a person into the shape of an alien being is something else: if he doesn't feel like an alien, he will never convince anyone else that he is. It's a good device for explorers as long as the two life-forms involved are roughly the same size and shape: a four-meter Arcturan serpent will never persuade anyone that he's a ten-centimeter Crystalloid from Vega, particularly since the two forms have never been able to communicate and you need to be assisted by an ESP of the race you're turning into in order to know what it feels like to be one.

For Ungrukh the process was relatively simple, but it was intimidating enough for Khreng to attach the electrodes to his skull and to Espinoza's connections.

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He pulled the switch, closed his eyes. . .and over an endless half hour Espinoza gave him a life. Even if he never hypnoformed again, his mind would always be threaded with wisps of alien memory. . . .

Strange shape, strange land, cruel time, a boy three years old dragged screaming into manhood and whipped in school over the shape of every black-flame letter, trailing at dusk in a shivering crocodile of children seared of demons, that thin child who crouched beside you snottering all day dead of typhoid, *mazel tov*, Bar Mitzvah, thirteen years and you're old enough to pray in a quorum with your cracking voice, your old man's wizened face, *mazel tov*, meet your bride, *l'chaim!* you're a father—sorry, it only lived an hour, anyway the Cossacks are coming. . . .

:Not bad,: said Espinoza. *:No beautiful Jew, you're more a blacksmith than a scholar, but you'll do.:*

Khreng opened his eyes, upright, looked down and saw the long black caftan, through Prandra's eyes saw his face. Red hair and beard, fair enough; he looked in fact a lot like Shloimeh. Espinoza had picked the blacksmith as a good model for body type, big chest and shoulder muscles to mask the powerful torso and forefeet, heavy thighs to accommodate the tail. *:Keep your movements slow and close; any gross distortion and the field will crumble and break.:*

"I am choking, I think," said Khreng, pulling at his illusory neckband.

:It gets better later on. Now you, Prandra. You'll be a big girl, no beauty either, but we don't need the men chasing you.:

"Hah!" said Khreng. Prandra hissed, her equivalent of a giggle.

Who should be first to meet the strangers but Reb' Elya? He was everywhere, comforting the sick, pestering the healthy, blessing the newborn, collecting from the poor for the poorest. "Come home, stay with me," he said. "I have only the one room, but there's a little shed in back, where I keep the pickles—they only smell in summer—and I'll put in a stove, with blankets and a featherbed. . ." He paused, looked at them, felt (they could tell) a little shiver, and added, to cover, "Come, come, you'll have a glass tea? Then I have to meet the Lubliner, a big man, guests are coming, a busy time. . ."

:He knows something,: Prandra told Espinoza. *:I can't tell what.:*

:Intuition. . .he's not an

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ESP: some kind of sensitive. . .:

Chava, the Rebbetsin, was resigned to unexpected guests; they meant light eating on the following night. But lemon tea was a cheap drink and not a bad one. The Katzes refused cookies (more dog food).

"Where did you say you're from?" Reb' Elya asked.

"Krasniewic," said Khreng/Katz. He was relieved to be sitting down. Walking upright was hell; he thought his spine would crack and his tendons rip. Prandra was even worse off because she felt some of his pain as well as her own. How would they find the Qumedon if they were half crippled?

:No other way,: said Espinoza.

"Krasniewic?" Elya clasped his glass in both hands and blinked at them over the rim. "I never heard of it."

"Oh, you know," said Chava. "That place where they all talk like Litvaks."

The loaves come out of the oven, burnished, hollow when they're knocked on the bottom. The smell is superb.

"The Lubliner rebbeh," said Elya, "same first name as you, Yaakov Yitzhak, he's called the Seer. . .they say he can look at a man's forehead and see into his soul. . ." His own look seemed to wonder what that seer might find within them. He was still conscious of that something, that grain of sand or seed of doubt which had been planted in him during the agonizing moment in the synagogue.

The youngest of the little boys, not much more than a baby, crawled about them on the floor. Prandra gave him a piece of cookie and stroked his head. It might be possible to love such a creature.

Elya picked up the child quickly and put him on the bed in the corner. Then he blushed. He was a hospitable man; he did not know why he felt uneasy.

Prandra, cramped spine and all, smiled to herself because she had not thought of the child as a morsel.

Reb' Elya got up and Khreng followed; the women were not expected to meet the Lubliner. "I can make up the bed in the storeroom," Prandra said. Elya tapped the table with his fingertips, hesitating, and to calm his uneasiness she took her feelings about Tugrik and Emerald (separated by such distance and danger) and placed them as well as she could among the complicated folds of his emotions. "That's right," he whispered, nodding. "That's good."

The children played and quarreled loudly. Chava

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grabbed and scrubbed them for the Sabbath, rattled pots, tasted, jabbed the chicken with a fork, all the while yelling personal questions at the top of her voice and giving her life away in return:

"—terrible time with the little one, they thought I'd never—"

Prandra swept the hard earth floor, shifted the pickle crock, laid down mattresses and featherbeds, her mind with Khreng crossing the marketplace toward the road from Lublin.

"—certainly are strong, I've never been able to lift that thing, Gitte-Frima next door got a hernia—"

Scholars and schoolboys in Sabbath clothes, the rich, the poor, the important, the insignificant, all paraded to meet the rabbi of Lublin. Everyone with a question, an ache, an Evil Urge, a little money to help loosen the holy tongue. A few were women, two barren ones who wanted to conceive, and one pregnant with the twelfth who wanted to stop; the rest of them stayed home putting their houses in order and shaking their heads over the foolishness of men.

"—married to a rabbi God bless him you're better off not every schlemiel in the street he thinks can give him a holy word I tell him if he got one word just one word from every schlepper he ran after he'd be wiser than Solomon if I didn't bring him the samovar when he got married he likes his tea so much I wouldn't see him Monday to Friday—"

:Just like my aunt Lena. . .: said Espinoza.

Even the count was there, with his cousins, to see what was so fine about the Seer of Lublin.

Prandra was scanning them all, using the quick network of relationship she had drawn up the night before. For Kostopol they were a crowd, actually only a few dozen; every one of them, count and all, held that odd hard thing only Reb' Elya was conscious of; for the others it was masked by anticipation of the Sabbath, the holidays, the honored guest—or perhaps it had simply settled down among the usual griefs and terrors of their lives. . . .

"He's coming! There he is, the rebbeh! There!"

Down the road, in a dust cloud, the rabbi came. Riding a horse, dapple-grey, a sleek trim animal, its hooves touched the earth as lightly as if it were dancing. It was like a piece of the sunless sky; behind it, six disciples marched, brisk of step and singing a song of the Joyous Festival:

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"He has divided the sea
for His children, bim bam!
but their enemies drown
in its waters. . ."

As it came closer the procession slowed—

And Khreng's skin prickled, not from what he saw but from what Prandra was seeing through his eyes.

The pale horse picked its way through the dust cloud; the oiled reins rippled lightly on its neck, almost like snakes, wound themselves around a thin white hand. . . .

Reb' Elya yearned, his eyes filled. He had no wisdom, no learned tongue to speak with the holy and the pious. He would have been content with one deep look into the eyes of the Lubliner. But his own eyes were blurred with tears; he could see the billowing silk caftan, the shining black Cossack boots, the fur hat, the white hair and beard, could hear the pattering steps of the followers singing their songs of holiday and Sabbath—but the eyes were withheld from him: tears came between.

Prandra and Espinoza saw very clearly from their distance; they fixed their minds on the cloudy rider and the cluster of figures on foot behind him; they saw that there was no heart in that body, no human heart, no brains or bowels, none penetrable to an ESP. It was dense as stone, cold as ice, cruel as death.

:There he is,: said Espinoza. *:Now what do we do with him?:*

:He knows we are here?: Prandra asked.

:I'm sure he does. Why should it bother him? He realizes we're helpless.:

Prandra gave more attention to the horse: it was not a real animal, but a simulacrum created of dust and wind.

:And those who march and sing. . .they're not persons only things made of dry leaves, branches and mud.:

Yes. Golems,: said Espinoza.

The people of Kostopol raised their voices and sang with the shadows: *He has divided the sea for His children. . . .*

On a quick malevolent impulse, Elya's first son, Yehoshua, a boy gentle as his father, picked up a stone and threw it at the horseman. No one saw: it vanished before it struck and rebounded in three fragments. One struck Rosnicki in the neck; he clasped his hand to the spot and swore. Prandra, on the alert, picked up a message from Espinoza before he had time to implement it and covered the count's reaction swiftly: a Jew picked up/a stone/kicked up by the horse. The count only

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blinked and shook his head. Another fragment fell at the feet of Reb' Elya, who was standing with bowed head; in a dream he stooped to pick it up: it burned and he dropped it and stared at the small red spots on his fingers. The third struck Khreng in the forehead; he bit his tongue to repress a snarl. The Qumedon had acknowledged the presence of unbelievers.

:When do we talk to this person, Espinoza?:

:Not while he's throwing stones. I don't know if he'll ever give us a chance.:

:Is this the only one?:

:I think so. . .his operation is modest, so far. I hope so.:

Reb' Elya managed to confer the title of shammis on Mordcha Pipick, and at dusk he proudly summoned men to the bathhouse; it was never too late to become significant, and he was probably the most cheerful man in Kostopol; perhaps the others were overwhelmed by the presence of the Lubliner; the morning minyan who had prayed at Tsippe's had sweepings of guilt in the corners of their spirits; they could never know whether they would actually have killed Janchik.

Khreng sat in shul with the men of Kostopol and the Qumedon/rabbi, cursing his aching back; he prayed to the God of Solthrees with his voice and to Firemaster with his heart: *Unburden me of this Shape and this World, make me a man among men on Ungruwarkh and I never lift a foot off the planet again!* Perhaps the Qumedon had put flint in his heart as well.

Come in peace, crown of God, come with joy. . . .

Elya turned the pages of his siddur with trembling fingers while Reb Nachman chanted, and tried and tried to see the face of the Lubliner; always at that point on his visual field a flickering came before his eyes like the disturbances of certain headaches. *We hope, Lord our God, soon to see Thy majestic glory, when the abominations shall be removed from the earth. . .*What have I done, that I am blinded? Whom have I sinned against, O Lord? And what is the use of searching my soul? I have not done enough in the world, good or bad, to make it worth while for God to notice me.

He turned his eyes back to the letters of his prayers; these at least he could see clearly. *Angels of peace, may your coming be in peace; bless me with peace, and bless my table. . . .*

Prandra had withdrawn quietly into a corner while

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Chava changed clothes and blessed her Sabbath candles. She was satisfied that the Qumedon had been found and what was postulated had been proven, shaken because a Qumedon was an unsettling creature. What did it want with these people?

:To inflame them into bloodshed.: Espinoza had been quiet for a while, and she was glad to have word from him; it was becoming very lonely in Kostopol.

:That's silly. There's so much conflict in the universe he has only to sit and wait.:

:He wants to cause it, not sit and wait for it.:

Khreng, who had been receiving in silence, asked, *:Is that why Qumedni set up the time-vortices?:*

:I think most often they use them to observe alien peoples the way GalFed Central does in controlled experiments. I don't believe they generally make mischief. I said before, this one is criminal or insane.:

:It is very hard to ask a mad Qumedon to help us get back to our ship,: Prandra said. *:One thing strikes me as very odd. Is he responsible for the death of Zevi-Hirsch?:*

:Likely. You wonder why he waited thirty-six hours after that to make another move? I can't tell you. Our Qumedon is a riddle.:

:Does he have any weaknesses?:

:None that I know. . .:

"Good Shabbas!" cried Chava, and Reb' Elya came into the house with his sons and Khreng.

Reb' Elya did not eat with Reb Zalman and the Lubliner. He would have been welcomed, only a bit grudgingly, but he was frightened to be in the presence of those strange disciples and this saint whom he could not see clearly and whose words did not seem to have any meaning. No one else appeared to be bothered by the man; he wondered if he were suffering the onset of some terrible disease of the brain—madness, degeneration. . .even his guests made him fearful, and he did not know why. His mind unfolded a panoply of horrifying images: soul struggling in the meshes of slow decay while his wife and children watched in helpless anguish, were left to charity when he died. . . .

:Stop this, Espinoza! I can't bear it.:

:The Qumedon's doing it. It won't stop till we get out of here with him.:

Reb' Elya smiled with all his strength and broke the Sabbath bread.

Khreng closed the door of the storeroom as firmly as it

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would fasten. It was dark and they had no lamp because of the Sabbath; he had a tiny pencil-light tucked somewhere in his harness but it was too risky to use it. "Do we wait till they're asleep?"

"No use. I doubt the rabbi can sleep."

Both fumbled at their wrists for the remotes and pressed them, dropping to all fours with a shudder of relief. Khreng snorted and muttered, "Trying to eat with a spoon is as bad as walking on two legs." It was chancy, dropping the hypnoform field, but they could resume it at any time using the remote switches until the machine in the shuttle had been cleared and reset, and Espinoza would warn them of danger. As uncomfortable Solthrees, they would get no sleep and be drained of their febrile energy.

They removed the contact lenses, which dimmed their night vision, and stared at each other. "I like you much better as Khreng," Prandra said.

"As a Solthree you find me tasty, I suppose."

She flicked his nose with the tip of her tongue. "Not bad."

:Take a scan with me,: said Espinoza. *:If nothing's doing, you can sleep.:*

Exhausted as she was, Prandra forced herself to scan the village and as far beyond as she could reach. The old dozed, the sick turned restlessly, the young made love in celebration of the Sabbath, babies snorted and snuffed like little animals, a child or two cried out in nightmare. . . .

:Stay with me,: she said, *:I don't understand all this about Rosnicki.:*

In the big country house the count and his cousins were finishing their meal with brandy in the company of Father Chryzostom, who was there to discuss the matter of repairs to the church roof.

Rosnicki was shaking his head. "Money doesn't grow on trees."

One of the cousins grinned. "It grow on Jews."

Rosnicki, who knew that Reb Zalman the Rich Man was no more affluent than any rag merchant in the Warsaw Ghetto, nodded. He didn't want to be shown up as a country cousin. "We don't do badly here."

"The way they go round in rags. . .you'd never know what they have buried underground in old pots and kettles."

"Those scrolls of theirs with silver crowns. . ."

". . .always money to lend. . ."

". . .give them a good shake. . ."

Among those laughing men with their heavily blued jaws

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and glittering eyes, Rosnicki, began to feel that the conversation was running out of control. "They're my Jews—"

"No reason why you shouldn't get the most out of them, Oscar."

"I've done very well," he said with dangerous mildness. "I don't believe there's much left in them."

"Nonsense! If you were to get them together, for instance, when they are in synagogue tomorrow, and—"

Rosnicki got very red in the face with rage and brandy. "I don't—" *care to deal with my people that way*, he had been going to say, and hang city sophistication—and a small spot on his neck stung and burned where it had been struck by a stone a few hours before. "I don't think that's a bad idea at all," he said.

:Espinoza, do we warn them?:

:How? Tell Reb' Elya you had a dream? He'll think you're crazy, or else he is, and he's near enough that now. Wait till tomorrow.:

Tomorrow.

And in one teardrop of his eye

the Rabbi sails across the sky. . . .

Rabbi Qumedon, we must find how to sail you off this planet.

At the inn, a ghostly horse was tethered, and six mock-men of clay and twigs lay upon benches. In Reb Zalman's best bedroom the Qumedon, a pulsing vortex of energy, spun like a star. Prandra pulled away from that quickly, and with the recoil fell asleep.

Reb' Elya did not sleep. How could he? He stared at the Sabbath candles until they guttered out in a fume of hot wax, and then at the lamp, which still had oil to use up and would be left until it went out by itself. The light meant nothing to him; his spirit was in darkness. The wife and children he loved were breathing softly around him, vulnerable and ephemeral. The people of the village, whom he had known all his life, had something wrong with them, that showed in a dulling of their eyes. . . .

No, it is I who have something wrong, my eyes. . . .

Was it that which had turned the Lubliner away from his sight? Had the holy man seen something in his eyes that repelled him, and so avoided them? Even the count, with whom he had gotten along tolerably well for so many years, seemed to suggest some vicious threat with every look and gesture, as he thought back on them.

It is I! I! He screamed inside.

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O Lord our God, King of the universe, how can I pray to You?

He pulled himself out of bed in a sudden movement of terror and despair, afraid to look at Chava and the children in case he might see something ugly and filthy in them. He grabbed his head, pulled at his hair, in a twist of anguish found himself facing the door to the storeroom.

That ordinary, coarse-looking pair, from that Krasniewic he had never heard of—who were they, and what, that they should have made him so uncomfortable the first time he had set eyes on them? In their eyes he had seen clearly enough a still, watching strangeness. No mistake, they had not blinded him. And yet their outlines, their very shapes, had never quite set or solidified. They had a shimmer to them that was—

Full of horror, unable to stop, he found himself picking up the lamp, which was never moved on the Sabbath, and walking toward the door.

Espinoza, who also needed some rest, had been drifting on the whispering memory of an old melody. Centuries of practiced instinct alerted him.

:Oh my God! Khreng, Prandra, wake up! WAKE UP!:

Prandra, chin resting on Khreng's shoulder, sniffed and went on dreaming. Padding down a vast hall till she came to the niche where Espinoza waited in his blue globe. "Hullo, Espinoza, you don't look a day older."

:Wake up, you damn fool, change back!:

"Ha, Espinoza, you always are a joker!"

In desperation Espinoza plunged into Elya's mind, but there was nothing for him to grasp at in its foaming turmoil.

Elya did not even have the choice of screaming or weeping now. His hand was rigid around the base of the lamp, his body propelled him against his will. The thought that the couple might be making love jetted into his mind, and a shameful desire to see them made him burn cold with sweat. He did not know how skilful the Qumedni were at turning a person's feelings against himself.

Espinoza knew very well, but he had no mouth to shout with, no eyes to close in despair. Khreng and Prandra were impervious.

Elya opened the door, his body vibrating like a tuning fork with internal tremors, lifted his lamp and saw the

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demons. Their deep-red bodies, heavy muzzles, slit eyes, and fearful claws. His trembling intensified, but he could neither move nor wake, and there was nothing for him to wake to.

One, which had been resting against the other, stirred and lifted its head. Elya's teeth unclenched at last. "Shaddai!" he cried in a strangled whisper. "*Mazzikim!*"

Prandra opened her flame-colored eyes and stared at him. *:Oh God, Prandra, why in hell didn't you wake when I called!:*

Prandra yawned and Elya's body jerked in terror. Khreng growled softly, his nose twitched.

Elya, in the light of the trembling flame, hair awry and nightgown bunched in his other hand, was whispering, "*For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways, they shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone, thou shalt tread upon the lion and the adder, the young lion and the adder shalt thou trample under foot. . .*"

:He really does believe we are demons,: Prandra said in some wonder.

:Don't try to change his mind or you'll drive him right over the edge.:

Reb' Elya, in spite of everything, managed to conquer himself enough to close the door and touch the talisman on the doorpost.

"Spare Chava and the children," he whispered. "Please. . ." Under his fear there was a terrible gulf of sadness that his hospitality had been betrayed and all of his love of God had come to nothing. "You are the ones who were called Jacob and Sarah, aren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then take me if I have sinned, God help me, but don't—"

"Rabbi, Reb' Elya, we have not come for you. Not for you!"

"I think you have already taken the Lubliner and left some strange empty thing in his place. . ."

Prandra sighed. "No, rabbi, it's not so simple. . ." She got up on her hind legs, so that her head was level with his. "How are we to talk to you?"

Elya shrank back against the door. Her solidity, the sleekness of her belly, and the faint rank smell about her suggested that she had borne and suckled demon whelps. "You are playing with me," he said sadly. "Demons are liars. . .I knew there was no such place as Krasniewic."

Prandra watched him a moment while he stood immobile, eyes far away, drifting

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toward some depthless precipice.

:Prandra,: said Espinoza, *:if you don't catch him—:*

Prandra shrugged away Espinoza's mind, dropped to her forelegs, tilted her head so that the lantern reflected its light in her eyes. "Look at me, Rabbi. You are blind, I make you see."

He did not want to, he tried to keep his eyes turned away, but there was nothing else to see in that room. And her eyes were not hidden from him, nor were they anything but eyes. Light reflected from the inner surfaces of the corneas onto the irises so that they were glowing translucent rims centered with black vortices; still they were calm sensitive animals'—no, person's eyes within any accepted range of creation.

"I don't mean to harm you or even touch you, only tell you what is happening, why you are so sick and unhappy. Your arm is stiff and aching, Rabbi, put down the lamp and let the oil burn out..." She took a small penlight from her harness—he noticed for the first time what a complicated piece of equipment she was wearing—turned it on and hung it from a nail; the other red shape behind her watched and blinked: "...You're free to speak and move...if you are too frightened, if you feel sick, you can go to bed and forget everything...do you want to do that?"

"No!" Elya cried, astonished at himself. "I want to know!"

Prandra showed her teeth, not too many, and gave Reb' Elya the short course.

She was quick. Almost instantaneously she drew from Espinoza everything she could understand of all he had learned of the psyche for three hundred years, collated it with her own experience, and turned the walls of Reb' Elya's mind to clear glass.

It was a violent act. Elya bent over, clutched his stomach and retched, but Prandra didn't hesitate. When he straightened, gasping, before he could think or speak, she gave him pictures: ...two demon shapes burning red in the evening light, going to and fro over the earth, lost on a journey from the unimaginable to the inconceivable/sucked into the trap laid by a sickly pale batwing creature, Ashmedai, King of Demons, who crouches over Kostopol and with a touch here, a twist there, turns them sick and drives them to rage/Janchik kills Zevi-Hirsch—Elya feels devoured by sin and faints in the synagogue—stammers his agony, his trembling hands wind tefillin/and the minyan plans to kill—

"Oh, no!" Reb' Elya cried. "Never! They'd never dream of

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doing such a thing! You're ly—"

(. . .picks up the Sabbath lamp and opens the door to the storeroom to see if the man and woman are making—)

"Stop!" Elya's face was flaming.

Prandra grinned with all her teeth. "That is the way you usually behave?"

"No, no, but—"

"It is the demon Ashmedai that does this," she said, "That's what I'm trying to tell you. . ."

. . .as the minyan direct their rage at Janchik, Rosnicki is approaching. . .

"It is you who saves Janchik from being killed. . .and your friends. . ."

Janchik, come have a glass of tea with me!

"I didn't know—"

"Perhaps not, but you do what is necessary."

. . .when the minds of all Kostopol hold suspicion and unease like fragments of flint waiting to be sparked/the rabbi comes on his horse of dust and wind, with his disciples of twigs and clay. . .

"I knew when I couldn't see his eyes. . ." Tears streamed from his own. "Will he hurt Reb Zalman?"

"Not now."

"Is there no true Lubliner?"

"He exists, but I don't know what is become of him."

. . .last flicker of imagery, a fragment of stone burns Elya's fingers/stings the neck of Rosnicki, who agrees to a plan. . .

"It always comes to such a plan," Elya whispered.

"Now we ask: we want to warn your people but we don't know how."

"Do you really know what will happen tomorrow?"

"No, but this devil wants to drive men to fight and kill."

"Then what can I tell you?" Elya shrugged. He was leaning against the door, calm enough but feeling slightly nauseated, his heart bumping. "Men like Rosnicki make these plans. . . sometimes they wake up in the morning with headaches from drinking too much brandy and give them up. . .If they decide to carry them out, we go and talk to them and sometimes manage to scrape up enough money to satisfy them. Sometimes even then they kill us."

"And you don't fight," Prandra muttered. Before he could answer, she went on, "We do what we can and make no plans. Still. . ." she kept looking at him and he turned deeply shy. "You are a good sensible man, not cowardly. Remember you are doing nothing wrong and are not thinking evil thoughts of your own will. You have nothing to be guilty about. Shall I make you forget what I tell you?"

"No, I want to remember."

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He had plenty to worry about, for himself and his people, but he was free of the sick fears of madness. These demons, and their adversary Ashmedai, were very far from the local ones of his belief, which had no Satanic majesty, no smoky splendor, but were shadowy stunted things that lurked and whispered, like fear and rage, in dark places. He wondered if he had fallen into some sin by listening and believing, but—dear God, Little Father, I am free to pray....

He said hesitantly, "You don't seem much like demons to me."

Prandra opened her mouth and closed it again. Khreng rose and stood beside her. "It is not necessary for demons to be what men expect," he said.

"I believe you," said Elya. "Good night."

"I almost tell him everything," Prandra said. "I want to."

:Just as well you didn't. That's a nice piece of hypnodrama you put on. I didn't know you could handle that kind of therapy.:

"Is that what it's called?" she asked indifferently. She was sulky with overexertion, crouched down and rubbed her chin on her forefeet. "It's risky, only for emergencies...I do that for my sister when she thinks it is her fault, her baby dies."

:Be careful or you'll end up a five-star ESP.:

"Can we arrange to give the count a headache?" Khreng asked.

:That won't stop the Qumedon.:

What stops the Qumedon? Prandra pulled a shield around her mind, not to hide from Khreng or Espinoza, but to give herself a few quiet minutes to think.

...Not everything he does is successful...what weaknesses do powerful creatures have? On Ungruwarkh no one is stronger than Khreng and I, though there are many equal...the great power over us is starvation, and a Qumedon...needs energy most likely... and...Reb' Elya has stopped the Qumedon once—by being foolhardy and generous!

She snorted.

...But there are things we learn here that are useful, I'm sure...only Espinoza is too old and tired and Khreng and I are too inexperienced to use them...

Khreng said suddenly, "The rabbi does fight, you know. Otherwise the Qumedon does not give him so much attention."

She laughed. "Are you sure you're not an ESP?"

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"If I am no one puts me in any bottle."

It was not quite morning on Earth, in Kostopol. Khreng stood by the open door of the shed, watching the fading stars; no one he knew lived around them in this quarter of the sky.

:I wish I could be out there with you,: said Espinoza (a young man in his strength. . .).

"The sky is clear, it means bright sun," Khreng said. "I hate these scratchy lenses on my eyes."

"So do I. . .the sky is strange here with these clouds that move and change."

:Move and change yourselves, friends, or Chava and the children will take fits.:

Prandra laughed. "Maybe the children like the big pussy cats."

:I'm glad you can be so cheerful when we have no plans and don't know what to do.:

Khreng said, "On Ungruwarkh we act quickly and don't make secret plans because everybody knows what they are as soon as you think of them." Prandra laughed again and he grunted. "This makes the men faithful—and the women silent. I think I die here soon if we can't get back."

Prandra asked, "Khreng, when you are a child, what do you do when you meet a bully or a bigger challenger?"

"I give him a good thump on the snout before either of us has time to think, and even if he beats me up, he thinks twice before he bothers me again."

"Ha, today nobody gets a chance to think twice."

Though it had slept beneath a clear sky, Kostopol woke a little tense and irritable as if there had been wind and thunder during the night. Babies disdained the breast and cried, children woke red-eyed and whined to sleep longer, banked fires ebbed, letting the Sabbath hotpots cool, and Janchik and a couple of other Polish boys dashed about, summoned by frantic wives, to shake and relight them.

Chava wrung her hands, but Elya for once did not complain about the coldness of the tea. He barely saw around him, hardly noticed the guests at his table, and Chava, noting the strange expression on his face, did not question him.

He prepared for shul: exchanged his yarmulkeh for a fur-rimmed shtreimel, shook out his tallith from its bag and swept it over his shoulders. As he left the house with the three older boys, Chava following with the baby, he spread his arms as if to draw the children under his shawl, and as suddenly dropped them.

"Moisheleh, you look as if

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you have a cold, maybe you should stay home."

"No, Tateh, I'm all right."

The dread he did not feel for himself had driven its claws through them to pierce him. He had no desire to run, he had no world beyond Kostopol, and he did not know how to tell others to run, or where. The curious effect of meeting the demons, or whatever creatures of the night they were, had been to lessen his belief in them, and though he now only half believed, he thought, hoped, prayed that God, creator of angels and demons, would give him a sign.

The great rabbi of Lublin came to shul with his disciples, their faces pale as porcelain-clay, their shadows crisp and dancing on the rutted ground.

Reb' Elya pulled the shawl over his head and plunged his spirit into prayer. A few shafts of light pierced the dim synagogue windows and dust motes whirled in them briefly and drifted into shadow. *Master of all worlds! What are we? What is our life? What is our goodness? What our righteousness? What our helpfulness? What our strength?* The white-covered heads, striped blue or black, nodded and whispered on the drifts of the words, raised voices and sang, the sound was swallowed in a dead air. In his house among the orchards, the count and his cousins were perhaps holding their heads and groaning, swearing to leave off brandy and vodka, turning in their sweated linen sheets to sleep again. Perhaps not. *My offering, consumed by fire, a sweet savor to Me, you shall be careful to offer to Me at its proper time.* Jews shut into a synagogue set afire, burning and screaming, a sweet savor. . .the demon rabbi Ashmedai, standing on the beemah only a few feet away, turned the pages of a siddur quietly, raising his voice occasionally, keeping his eyes down. Elya wondered that the words of the prayers did not leap off the pages and burn in outrage, and then: What have I to say? I am here silent in his presence, and I have taken the word of the *mazzikim*—the word of the demons themselves!—that they will try to save us. How can I live under such conditions? *To thee, O Lord, I called, I appealed to my God: What profit would my blood be, if I went down to the grave? Will the dust praise thee? Will it declare thy faithfulness?*

Prandra, far back in the women's section, was far away. *:They are getting up. . .preparing to saddle the horses. . .they seem terribly cheerful. . .:*

:I hope you know what we're doing,: Khreng said.

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:The rabbi himself tells us when to move,: Prandra said calmly.

:You have more faith in him than he has in us.:

:There is no other choice.:

Men rose to pray, swaying with fervor, and sat down again, rose and sat down again, raised their voices in curiously muffled song, picked up again the threads of the prayers. *Thou, O God, openest daily the gates of the east, and cleavest the windows of the sky; thou bringest forth the sun from its place, and the moon from its dwelling, and givest light to the world. . .* the dust motes swam and trembled; children whimpered and women hushed them, but did not let them out to play in the aisles as usual, or go out to the anteroom to gossip; nor did the men leave to conduct their weekly debates on Talmudic exegesis; they glanced at each other furtively, and did not ask whether they were leaving and why not.

But Prandra rose quietly and went down the staircase to the lobby. To move at all was like pushing through shoulder-high sand, the air had become so thick and clotted; she expected obstruction. In Reb' Elya's terrified mind she had glimpsed a shadow of what was to come.

Reb Zalman opened the curtains of the Ark and its carved doors, took out the Torah Scroll, and brought it to the lectern: its silver crown glittered, the bells on the crown's rim tinkled, the readers gathered round, it was unrolled . . .Prandra, breathing hard, reached the lobby and waited at the door to the sanctuary.

The outside door was ajar; a cat wandered in, a common short-haired animal, brindled. She looked at it: it gave her a quiet yellow stare for three seconds and leaped for her eyes. She picked it from the air and threw it out the door quite gently, for her. "Qumedon likes to play," she said, and smiled grimly.

The rabbi of Lublin came forward to read the first part of the week's portion.

Reb' Elya knew that his words did not have their proper shapes, that the sounds did not reverberate from the beams and timbers, and yet they reached some depth of the brain where images grew. . .

AND THE LORD SPOKE UNTO MOSES SAYING:
COMMAND AARON AND HIS SONS, SAYING:
THIS IS THE LAW OF THE BURNT-OFFERING. . .

in the breast of every man and woman a small spark was struck from the stone fragment which

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had been lodged there, leaped to the dried-out tinder stored during thousands of years of insult and repression

THE FIRE OF THE ALTAR SHALL BE KEPT BURNING

a little flame kissed the altar of every heart for Zevi-Hirsch was dead, the signatory of a thousand, a hundred thousand, hundreds of thousands beyond

THE FIRE UPON THE ALTAR SHALL BE KEPT BURNING THE FIRE SHALL BE KEPT BURNING UPON THE ALTAR CONTINUALLY

Reb' Elya began to tremble

MY OFFERINGS MADE BY FIRE

fires leaped and licked among the spirits of the Kostopoliers, and the pale disciples, smiling, nodded and swayed

FROM THE OFFERINGS OF THE LORD MADE BY FIRE, WHATSOEVER TOUCHETH THEM SHALL BE HOLY

the demon rabbi swept into the second part of the week's portion, Reb Zalman's privilege, and the men of Kostopol did not mover or blink, but sat like stone ovens harboring fire

A SWEET SAVOR UNTO THE LORD

they were given a vision: Count Rosnicki lusting for the silver of the Torah crowns, their gold-threaded coverings

WHERE THE BURNT-OFFERING IS KILLED SHALL THE SIN-OFFERING BE KILLED

saddling horses, gathering peasants with scythes

WHEN THERE IS SPRINKLED OF THE BLOOD THEREOF

Elya's heart fought like a bird in its ribcage

WHERE THEY KILL THE BURNT-OFFERING SHALL THEY KILL THE SIN-OFFERING

the readers on the beemah took one step back from the Scroll

THE BLOOD THEREOF SHALL BE DASHED AGAINST THE ALTAR

as if it had been spattered with blood, as if it were being consumed by fire

AN OFFERING MADE BY FIRE UNTO THE LORD

the unearthly voice rose howling like a chimney of fire

IT SHALL BE THE PRIEST THAT DASHEST THE BLOOD AND THE FLESH OF THE SACRIFICE

THE FLESH OF THE SACRIFICE, SHALL BE BURNT WITH FIRE

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IT SHALL BE BURNT WITH FIRE

Reb' Elya's lips quivered and moved without a sound, fire moved from man to man and the heat of their passion scorched him, the count came riding, smiling, calling out laughingly to his cousins and his men. . .

Stupid, stupid, said voices in the ears of Khreng and Prandra. Make no plan, have nothing to do, and you do nothing, stupid!

You, Reb' Elya, know no Names

you, Reb' Elya, are an ignoramus

an ignoramus!

He knew a thousand names for God, but none of the most powerful commanded by great saints and towering scholars to bring down the right arm of the Lord, His pillar of fire, His burning bush

MOSES POURED OUT THE BLOOD it rose pounding into the heads of the men

DASHED THE BLOOD AGAINST THE ALTAR

the riders were in the marketplace and Prandra, slipping into the sanctuary, dared not admit a thought for fear of the demon

"Yes, the demon," whispered Khreng

Watch. Ungrukh, said the demon

MOSES TOOK OF THE BLOOD the Qumedon delivered his strength to the men of Kostopol

MOSES PUT OF THE BLOOD the Qumedon gave them his malice

MOSES DASHED THE BLOOD

and Elya, gathering his horror, his passion, his intelligence in one skein, one half second of mountainous despair, for in all those thousands of years those hundreds of thousands lay dead, saw with complete clarity that the men of Kostopol would wind their tallithim about the necks of their tormentors, in spite of scythes and pitchforks, break up the pews and lecterns for weapons, trample the Books—and then the King of Demons would withdraw his strength and the fire would grow veins outward, and the blood flow along them to Lublin, to Warsaw and beyond

threw back his head and howled "NO! NO! NO!" his whole being a bursting artery of fear and love, "Dear Lord God, King of the Universe, remove this abomination!"

Without a thought Khreng and Prandra pressed the switches of their remotes.

The count and his followers swarmed stamping across the lobby and into the sanctuary.

Khreng and Prandra crouched free in their bodies fire-red in the flaked yello

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light, and roared in pure pleasure, like forges, like dragons, like earthquakes, and leaped in unison three bounds over the lecterns scattering pages, straight on the Qumedon. Converging with Elya, who had sprung out in the first violent act of his life. All four vanished in a gulping implosion.

"Demons!" roared the count and his men, in one instant turning queasy with fright. "*Mazzikim!*" whispered the congregation, and trembled. Chava and the children screamed with horror.

As the Master of Demons disappeared, his works undid themselves. His disciples and his horse reverted to their elements. But they had this much life in them: the six disciples jumped up on tiptoe with heads thrown back, crowing like cocks, for a quarter of a minute before they crumbled in heaps of earth-clotted twigs; and the horse, tethered in the inn yard, reared on its hind legs and brayed once, powerfully, in idiot discord and then turned transparent, dust sifted into the whirlwind. A great echo pulsed outward from it, rebounded and died.

The count, with cousins and farmers, backed away from the sanctuary; the congregation hurried out, pulling one another by sleeves and fringes, gathering Elya's family shivering among them.

Under the blazing noon sun, the metallic bell of the sky, they turned, twisted, peered everywhere. "What happened? Where are they? How?" They looked to the sky and the sun, to earth, trees and houses, and found no sign.

Over the southern horizon an odd cockle, a buckling of the sky's surface, was obscured by the sun.

Khreng and Prandra, tossed in a heap with Elya, stood up and found themselves in a bubble. Its surface, luminous semitransparent silver, shifted and mottled like soap-film; under their feet its stuff was not quite solid, of a firmness created by a force-field; it had a slithery feel. Beneath their pads, through it they could see Earth, a distorted ball as in a fisheye lens, the moon, a pale concave disc; above and around them a stunning collection of nebulae magnified by the warp of the field: spiral, barred, globular. It was a fearful panorama; it was meant to be so. The heavens between these lights were as blue as Espinoza's globe. But there was no contact with Espinoza.

Elya was only half conscious, and they lifted him between them, made a seat for him with their bent knees and a

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back with their entwined arms so that he was supported by a magnificent red throne of living plush; but it did not mean much to him, for he opened his eyes, took one wild look around, screamed and wrapped his tallith round his head. "I am in Gehinnom," he whispered through its folds.

They could not deny it. They too were intimidated. Their hair rose, their hearts beat faster; the earth under their feet, through the translucent film, was far away but not too far away to pull them down crashing; the nebulae above and around looked near enough to drag them as hideously burst and frozen bodies into their great orbits.

They breathed good air, their hearts beat time, but the space they were enclosed in seemed timeless.

Elya was well rooted in time. He pulled the cloth half away from his face, enough to free his mouth though he kept his eyes shut, and said, "Kostopol? Chava and the children?"

Prandra could not keep her eyes from circling the surface of this sphere which had no door and was a mind-splitting window to the universe. "The demon has left them," she said. She hoped it was so. It was hard to reassure him: she was unwilling to frighten him with more esp, and without Espinoza she would have to pull the language from Elya's mind and feed it to Khreng as well.

Qumedon appeared, suspended before them. A spinning unradiant star, three meters across, nothing-colored, a few points of fire swimming within it like fish in a bowl, in its center a luminous globe small enough to hold between the hands.

Firepoints struck their minds:

YES YOU ARE QUICK AND CLEVER UNGRUKH AND YOU ARE INTERRUPTING MY GAME

The bright globe darkened a little, and the huge bubble began to swing slowly, like a pendulum. Earth and moon went here and there beneath them.

Khreng and Prandra bent their heads and closed their eyes. "Stop, please," Prandra said. The bubble slowed and settled.

"Where are we?" Khreng got back his breath and his stomach. "What is this place?"

YOU ARE IN THE CENTER OF THE VORTEX THE GLOBE I AM CARRYING IS ITS CONTROL THIS PLACE IS TIMELESS

"Is there only one of you in this sector?"

THERE IS

"You are a creature of such

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power," Prandra clenched her teeth trying to keep fear and contempt out of her mind, "why do you choose a small village and a few lost strangers to play games with?"

DO YOUR CHILDREN NOT PLAY WITH SMALL ANIMALS?

"My children don't play with people."

The Qumedon shrank quietly in one supple transformation and became a naked man. Without skin. Sitting cross-legged in the air holding the bright globe in his hands; beautiful in complexity, terrible in implication, he was a triumph of Qumedon mastery, no stupid animal of dust and wind. A red glisten of muscle laced in purle veins and pulsing scarlet arteries, shimmering blue-white in the fibrous sheaths between muscles and over the tendons of his intricate hands and feet; within his breast a heart beat *lubdubb*, his eyes were firepoints.

A smell of meat filled the place. Beyond control, Khreng and Prandra found saliva jetting into their mouths.

NICE FAT PEOPLE ON THIS PLANET

Elya, between the two of them, shrank with terror.

Khreng spat his mouthful at the feet of the living model and snarled, "We do not yet kill or eat one. Qumedon!"

Qumedon moved the network of muscles in mouth and neck into laughter, tossed the ball into the air and caught it. The bubble trembled.

WHERE DID YOU GET A TASTE FOR MEAT, UNGRUKH? DID FIREMASTER GIVE IT TO YOU WHEN HE CREATED YOU FROM RED LAVA?

"Say what you mean!"

Laughter. OR WAS IT I WHO PICKED A PRIDE OF LEOPARDS OFF SOLTHREE AND CHANGED THEM ONLY A LITTLE, DROPPED THEM ON A PLANET TO SEE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN?

They swallowed that information in an unhappy lump without asking themselves if it were true. It was clearly within his power. "Firemaster has more effect on our lives than you," Khreng said.

YOU ARE NOT ON UNGRUWARKH, AND HERE I CREATE THE EFFECTS.

Was he more forceful as a creature of unimaginable power who reflected the shape and texture of the cosmos—or as a flayed saint with the humanly evil mind of the persecutor?

I LIKE THIS PLACE, UNGRUKH. THAT IS WHY I PLAY MY GAMES HERE.

"Far away from Qumedon," Prandra said, risking jets of fire from those eyes.

YES. I'M A PERSON WHO

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BRINGS NEW IDEAS TO MY PEOPLE AND FOR THAT THEY WILL TOLERATE A LOT.

Everything? Without limit? Prandra became aware that the questions she wanted answers for, swelling nodes in her brain, were being contained by all this talk. But the Qumedon was turning his intensity toward the shivering Elya.

RABBI, YOUR SHOCHET, REB NACHMAN, SLAUGHTERS AND SKINS MANY ANIMALS. DO I LOOK WORSE THAN THEY?

Elya whispered, "Ashmedai, a demon and a dead cow are not to be compared."

More laughter emerged between the white teeth among the naked muscles, and the Qumedon began to weave a skin, a tissue of capillaries, fibers, laminated cells, its surface horn-colored, puckered like an old man's and dotted with moles; sprouted white crinkled hair on his head, with side curls, mixed-grey brows and beard, body hair, provided himself with black breeches, black-and-white *tallith katan*, yarmulkeh, Cossack boots, tallith; cradled the globe in one arm against his heart as if its light were the white fires of space between the black-flame letters of the Torah Scroll. His eyes were nothing-colored. The Rabbi of Qumedon.

Elya turned pale.

YOU STOPPED A POGROM? MAZEL TOV, I'LL FIND ANOTHER GAME. I DON'T HAVE TO LIVE ON THIS PLANET, YOU DO... YOU THINK IT'S SAFER HERE WITHOUT ME? The telepathic voice, an astonishing homely Polish-Yiddish, was good-humored, almost gentle.

"When was it safe?" Elya said hoarsely. "My father died in a pogrom."

STAY ALIVE A HUNDRED YEARS, ELYA, MAYBE A FEW MORE...SEE THE SLAUGHTER THERE'LL BE.

"A hundred years ago and more," Elya whispered, "Bogdan Chmeielnicki killed my people by the hundreds of thousands during the Cossack Rebellion."

THIS WILL BE TWENTY-FIVE TIMES GREATER THAN THAT ONE...the fleshy lips curved in the white beard...YOU COULDN'T IMAGINE....

Prandra said quietly, "When you say such things, I think even your own people must not care much for you."

The Qumedon's laughter was dark. EVEN THE KINDEST OF US LIKES A GOOD GAME. The laughter rebounded and circled the walls of the bubble. IRONY IS ALWAYS GOOD; YOU LIKE IT YOURSELF, RABBI—AND AT THIS

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LEVEL IT IS SUPERB. YOU HAVE SAVED KOSTOPOL!

Prandra began to tease out a thought beneath the whirling helix of laughter.

Elya raised his eyes. "And that killing, will that be your work?"

YOU THINK MEN AREN'T CAPABLE?

Elya closed his eyes and tears slid between his lids. His spirit shrank into a hard tight ball of anguish.

"Rabbi!" Prandra thought he was drifting into the abyss once more.

Elya opened his eyes and regarded the Qumedon. "Ashmedai, if you know so much, tell me if my people will die forever in that slaughter."

Prandra wound a thought firmly around the deep center of her being like fine wire on a spindle. "Your people are alive seven hundred and fifty years from now," she said. "After that I can't promise." Her voice sank to its deepest velvet. "Qumedon, is it Thursday when your shuttle breaks down? That day when you make no move?"

Firepoints grew in the eyes.

"You burn me out too like the ESP of the *Ruxcimi?*" she spoke very quietly. "That is an impulse, I think. Too bad to bring such attention to yourself."

IF I KILL—

Very quietly. "You manipulate fear and hatred very well, but do you know everything about reasoning? Perhaps you are only a novice joker."

—YOU ANIMALS—

"Must think for ourselves, because Firemaster, you know, gives no answer.

"I see the power of this Qumedon, and I ask myself: why does he let us live, when he can kill us with a thought? Because he needs us. Needs *animals?* We have a shuttle, and even Qumedni, with all their powers, need ships to cross the universe and shuttles to land. . . but if he can use our shuttle, he does not need us. Can you use your shuttle?"

Silence.

"Your energy field disrupts GalFed instruments? Some such thing? I know very little about those matters. Still, the vortex draws energy from the mother ship and Qumedon carries his personal energy source in his shuttle. Espinoza says this. The source feeds both him and his engines. Probably if it does not operate fully, he can still draw enough for himself for a while, but not enough to get him back to his ship. He realizes this on Thursday and perhaps is not sure what to do. And he takes notice of our landing. He cannot come to us and say: Ungrukh, I am in trouble, I send you up the vortex, leave a message with my people the

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Qumedni to rescue me. Why not? Because he burns out a valuable ESP—an act which likely upsets coexistence with GalFed—and maybe this game he's planning is a little too bloody even for Qumedni who are their own law. . ."

YOU HAVE A LOT TO SAY TO THE MAD RENEGADE QUMEDON.

"All he can do is say: Look, I am a creature of a thousand powers, if you want to live you must do as I say—and he plays his game to please himself, to show off, to frighten us. . .

"We believe in your great power, Qumedon, but still you are not offering to let us live—I hate to say so, but even if you are rescued, your people don't look on you too kindly. There's no way to avoid that."

THEN WHY SHOULD I BOTHER KEEPING YOU ALIVE WHEN YOU WILL ONLY BETRAY ME?

"Tsk, he's in a bind," Khreng said. "He can't decide whether to save himself and go home in shame or stay here and die with his pride."

Elya, who did not understand a word but knew a bargaining session when he saw one, sat quietly in a crouch with his shawl wrapped around him.

SOMETIMES IT IS BETTER—

Prandra moved her head in a gesture she had learned from Reb' Elya himself. "It's always better to be alive today."

Khreng said, "I think—"

And the bubble turned upside down. And warped, pinched, squeezed, They tumbled, screaming; Qumedon rolled with them, clenched around his glowing ball.

Outside a blundering roaring vibration gripped and clawed, emitted sounds, colors all over the spectrum, blue, violet, aquamarine, screaming ultra whines and bass rumbles out of the very pit of matter

what?

THE VORTEX HAS PULLED IN

what?

alien creature?

hand, octopod, or

?flower with fire-petals bluing down the center into a black pit of suction

clasping the bubble like a hand and

turn off the vortex! Khreng/Prandra mindscreamed

NO MY ONLY CONTACT WITH THE

then change time, change time!

Qumedon was no longer a rabbi, but the cloud of primary energy enveloping the globe. Khreng, Prandra, Elya slipped and slid with it in hills and valleys over those petal-fingers of terrifying intensity burning through the field, the globe in

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the Qumedon darkened all light what? disapeared where? and brightened as the filmy sphere blew out to its former shape with an odd quavering warble. Silence.

"What in the Blue Pit is that?" Khreng picked himself up off Prandra, whom he had knocked flat. She was too weak to think, only lay panting.

The Qumedon seemed to be trying to pull itself together. Its fires were deep crimson, feebly wavering.

Khreng turned to Elya, who had somehow managed to sit up on the bubble floor, and was coughing. Or laughing.

He threw back his head and choked with laughter. "Oh, Ashmedai, if that's not the work of God there must be far greater demons than you!"

"Rabbi, are you hurt?"

"How could I be hurt when I'm consorting in hell with the demons?"

"Don't depend on it," Khreng said. "Qumedon, tell us what that thing is."

...I DON'T KNOW...The Qumedon's voice was as vague as its body. THE VORTEX PULLED IT IN I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THAT...SOMETHING FROM ANOTHER UNIVERSE....

Prandra was a little light-headed. "Perhaps it is Firemaster's apprentice!"

"Don't be fatuous," Khreng said. "Listen, Qumedon, if your vortex pulls in one more thing like that, I think you soon have no place to stay...and, Prandra, if you let me speak, I believe I can make a sensible suggestion. If the rabbi is set free and we are guided up the vortex, it is very simple to send a message to the Qumedni that one of their people lands in Sol III to explore and is trapped when his engines fail. It is not necessary to say anything else—regarding ESPS or games—and it is a way out of this impasse.

WOULD THEY BELIEVE YOU?

"You can believe us because you esp us. You know we cannot be liars and a radio message cannot be esped. When you are among your people, you make your own arrangements. You are very skilled at deception." In spite of himself Khreng's voice tailed off into a rasp of sarcasm.

Silence. The firepoints rippled and glittered in their aquarium of energy. The bubble trembled.

Prandra whispered, "I think if you stay on this planet your energy drains away till you are some shriveled black little thing like a burnt-out star..."

The firepoints intensified, their mouths went dry.

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SAY WHEN YOU ARE READY

Before they could react or speak: LISTEN, UNGRUKH, I HAVEN'T ASKED YOU MANY QUESTIONS SO PERHAPS YOU WILL ANSWER JUST ONE

It sank and rested gently on the floor of the bubble.

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT ESPINOZA?

"What do you mean?"

HE WANTS YOU TO KILL HIM

Prandra said sharply, "I don't esp that."

YOU ARE NOT YET A FIVE-STAR ESP WHAT DO YOU THINK ALL THOSE LOVELY DREAMS MEANT...THAT PATHOS THAT POOR BODILESS BRAIN-IN-A-BOTTLE ROTTING IN A RUNDOWN MUSEUM?

"He—"

HE BELIEVES HE HAS ONLY TO ASK THEN YOU WILL BREAK THE BOTTLE AND LET THE BRAINS RUN OUT AND NO ONE WILL BLAME YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE SAVAGE CATS FROM A PRIMITIVE PLANET AND DON'T KNOW ANY BETTER, the patterns of fire swirled like arrows representing ocean currents on a map, I KNOW YOU WOULDN'T DO SUCH A THING BUT SINCE YOU ARE DOING ME A FAVOR I AM WILLING TO REPAY...? UNGRUKH...IT WAS ON NO IMPULSE OF MINE THAT THE ESP OF THE *RUXCIMI* DIED....

Prandra kept her mind carefully clear and still. Khreng said stiffly, "Thank you, Qumedon, we manage our own affairs."

The Qumedon blinked out and was gone.

"Irony is always good," Khreng said. "Maybe we give up Firemaster and start worshiping the devil...Come, Rabbi, you are going home." He helped Elya to his feet.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Elya stood on the shifting surface, wondered what thoughts to think and what to make of them. He reached under his tallith to scratch his head. Was he to thank these beings? How? and whom? He looked from one to the other of the red *mazzikim*, their savage teeth and claws, lashing tails and char-black chevrons. *Keteb miriri?* Khreng gave him one calm blink. *Machlat?* Prandra's eyes were warm and clear as a summer sunset. He nodded. "Thank you, creatures of God."

"Where? Where?" The people of Kostopol looked and found no sign.

"I am here," said Elya. Among them in the market-

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place. The count and his men withdrew to one side of him, his congregation to another. Chava and the children threw themselves upon him with hysterical weeping.

"Elya! Elya!"

"Where have you been?"

"I have been among the demons and I seem to be well." He sighed. "I think."

"You're not—you're not—"

"I am not a demon rabbi, children—only the same Elya," he said, though it was not true. "It was the false Lubliner that was the demon, Ashmedai himself."

"We know that, Elya—and you were with him, among the demons—in Gehinnom?"

"It seemed so."

"And was it terrible?"

"I have no words to tell you."

"Then how did you defeat them? What Names, what spells?"

"I defeated no one. God spared me." He sighed again. "I hope He did the same for the Lubliner, the true one."

"Somebody says his carriage broke down when he was setting out here yesterday... he'll have to go straight home now, he can't stop over with Passover coming..."

They turned silent. Kostopol had been cut off from its promised glory and seized by demons instead.

"You seem strange, Elya," Chava whispered.

"What can I be, Chava? I've been frightened and I'm tired and sad." He gathered the children under his shawl. What could he say or tell? Mystics in wise books might claim a demon is this or that, but his own were indescribable. And as for what he had learned—Let it be a lie, Little Father, King of the Universe! Let it be a lie, what Ashmedai said....

"Rebbeh—" the count came to him, reddened, rubbed his neck. "I don't know what has been happening."

"I'm not sure myself, Count, believe me." He turned to his congregation in their shawls and their beards, feasted his eyes on those worn and humble faces. "Rabbosai, we have to finish the service...I think we should begin reading Torah again, with a little less fire and blood..."

There was nothing much to say to Espinoza. Prandra opened her mind and let him replay the scene for himself. Strapping herself down for lift-off, she said, "Is everything that Qumedon says true?"

:Yes. Everything.:

"And nothing can stop that slaughter? Nothing?"

:No.:

"Then we save our own lives, but I think we do nothing much for Kostopol."

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:Prandra, you said it yourself,: Espinoza sealed his own fate. *:It's always better to be alive today.:*

They warped outward.

—ACCEPT COURSE CHANGE OR WAIT ONE ORBIT? the radio asked.

"We don't lose much time," Khreng said. WAIT AS MANY ORBITS AS YOU LIKE, FIJI. THAT COURSE CHANGE LEADS DOWN A QUMEDON TIME VORTEX. . . .

When that was settled, he rubbed his head under Prandra's chin. "My old woman, I'm sick of tranquilizers and contact lenses and civilization. I want sleep." He flung himself back on the couch belly-up.

Epinoza, the man without skin, flesh, bones, nerves, heart, lungs, limbs, genitals, said, *:Times I called you eisenkop I never meant you had an iron head. Maybe one day you'll wish you did. You too, ESPrandra. . .:*

"Espinoza!" Prandra rumbled sleepily.

:Yes?:

"You stay with us, be with us as long as we need you?"

:Yes.:

"That's good. . ." She folded her limbs over her body, curled her tail about herself neatly; rising on waves of sleep, she considered, slowly and hazily, the shapes of minds, the organic structures that began them, the ideas and emotions that fulfilled them, wondered how a Qumedon's functioned and what with, whether a mind-model could ever be built, how. . .she had time for five minutes of her life's work before she drifted off.

Seven hundred and fifty years spiraling downward the men of Kostopol sang:

"This is the Torah
that Moses set before the
Children of Israel
the Children of Israel. . ."

Reb Nachman carried it in its tinkling crowns and glittering threads down from the beemah, around the synagogue, men reached out to touch it with their fringes and kissed them;

"Long life is in its right hand
and in its left hand honor
it is a Tree of Life
it is a Tree of Life
its way are pleasant ways
and all its paths are peace. . ."

Let it be a lie. Elya his spirit a teardrop, his mouth a blessing, took the words of the most loving and gentle of all rabbis, Israel Baal-Shem, Master of the greatest Name, in silence took the words, made them into a song and sang it:

Much, much have I learned *bim bam!*
much have I been able to do *bam bim!*
but there is no one to whom
I may reveal it *bim bam bim!* □

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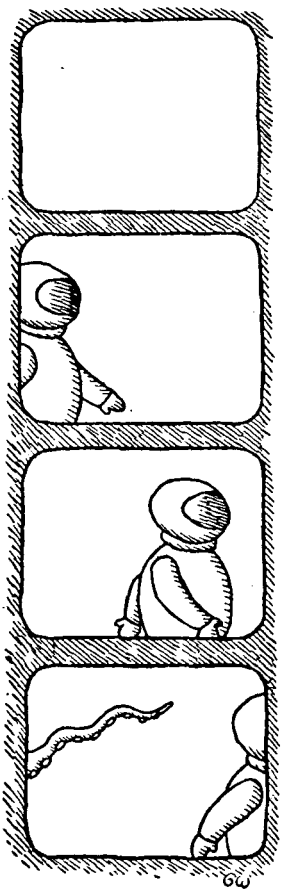
BAIRD SEARLES

FILMS



"They're Coming To Get You, Barbara"

TURNS OUT THE NEW FILM which I was going to review for this month won't be released until *next* month, and the film companies get up tight if you review ahead of release; but it's just as well, because I've wanted a breathing space to talk about an old film. By old, I merely mean not new; made in the late 1960's, it's not a classic but is well on the way to becoming one, and I want to talk about it here because it received minimal notice (like none) from reviewers when it first appeared. By now it is a prize example of the film that builds a reputation only by word of mouth, without even the benefit of TV exposure, because it's too rough to be shown thereon. Readers who live in cities or college towns, or who read the underground press, which has devoted some space to it in the last year, will know I'm talking about **Night of the Living Dead.**

I'd give a lot to know whether I would have been an early champion of this film if I had been doing this column when it first appeared. As it stands, I had heard about it some time before I saw it; in fact was getting quite paranoid because it was being talked

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about as a stand-out horror film, a field I'm supposed to know. Finally last summer I did see it, and can well understand its reputation. I attended a midnight showing, the audience of which was primarily hip kids in their 20s come to laugh it up. Instead, I haven't heard that kind of authentic audience response in the way of screams and gasps since the old days when an audience really did scream and gasp at horror movies.

Like the beautiful *Carnival of Souls*, my favorite unknown terror flick, NotLD was made on a shoestring in an unlikely locale (in this case, Pittsburgh) by—well, amateurs is an unfair word—let's say people out of the main stream of movie making. It is less subtle than *Carnival of Souls* but shares with it a kind of intelligent individuality that transcends the sometimes awkward writing and acting.

I'm tempted to go into detail about the plot, but perhaps it would be kinder not to. Suffice to say that it concerns a night when the recently dead are reanimated (and this is given *just enough* of a rationale) with a hunger for human flesh. Specifically, it concerns a group of people trapped in a lonely farm house by a pack of the ghouls. One of the several twists is that anyone who dies becomes a ghoul in a matter of minutes, and there is conflict in the group. . .

The film combines suspense/terror (what's going to jump out at you next?) with gut, shock horror (extremely graphic cannabalism) more successfully than any other I can think of. Presumably George A. Romero (director/photographer) and John A. Russo (writer) deserve the credit for this extraordinary film. I hope they make another. In the meantime, I advise any horror film buff to see it if it's playing within a hundred miles. I doubt if it will ever reach TV; if it does, much will have to be cut to "protect" the home audience.

A final note: "They're coming to get you, Barbara!" (said facetiously but as it turns out truthfully to the heroine early in the proceedings) has become this year's catchphrase hereabouts.

I do have one new film to talk about, a short, directed by Samuel R. Delany, called The Orchid. Delany, one of our best writers of science fiction, in his directorial debut has come up with a work that indicates he could make a go of film if he wanted to. It concerns a surrealist encounter between an older, square-type man (cos-

(continued on page 76)

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Curt Siodmak is in a light mood in the story below, but he is best known as a film writer who created some of the great horror films of the 40's, including "The Wolf Man" (for Lon Chaney, Jr.) and—to cite one that gave us nightmares when we were a kid—a Peter Lorre thriller called "The Beast With Five Fingers." Mr. Siodmak's novels include the best-selling DONOVAN'S BRAIN and, most recently, THE THIRD EAR (Putnam).

Variation of a Theme

by CURT SIODMAK

ART BROWN SAW THE halo for the first time in the Hotel Quirinale in Rome. It was eight in the morning, and he was shaving in the small bathroom which adjoined the cavernous bedroom with its exposed electric wiring and gurgling water pipes. Anne, his wife, was still asleep. It seems to be a law of nature that men who like to get up early marry women who love to stay in bed late.

A hot sun was warming the bathroom. In the mirror Art could see the two cupolas of the Church of Santa Trinita del Monte, but also the halo. It was about twelve inches wide, its rim half an inch thick. A golden glow emanated from it. At first Art thought that it was a reflection of the sun, bouncing back from a shiny surface, but there was no shiny surface in the bathroom with its bleached marble tub, dull tiles, and worn wooden floor.

The eerie illumination floated four inches above his head. Art finished shaving. He was not alarmed. Through the window he could see a forest of odd-shaped chimneys, tiny roof gardens with potted plants and washlines lacy with laundry, and large slanted glass roofs glistening in the sun. One of them might be reflecting that ring of light which had settled above him in midair.

Art put his face close to the mirror. To his surprise the luminous ring traveled with him. When he bent backward, it moved parallel with the top of his head. Art quickly bent his

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knees and shot up again. The aurora stayed attached to him. It looked like one of those golden rings fastened by an iron rod to the statues of the saints. Art tried to shoo the light away, but his hand moved through the luminous ring.

Outwardly calm, but with an inner trepidation, Art walked into the bedroom to ask Anne if she too could see the halo.

Anne's head was hidden under the goose feather pillow that cut out the noises, which, like a waterfall, came from the Via Bocca di Leone and the Via Condotti.

"Anne!" Art touched Anne's toe, since by touching the body farthest from the heart one does not frighten the sleeper. A physical alarm clock.

"What time is it?" Anne withdrew her leg.

"I think I got a halo," Art said. He could see that rim of light in the long mirror that covered the door of the wardrobe.

"You got what?" Anne asked, reluctant to face the day.

"A round thing of light around my head," Art said. "A halo."

"No wonder, after visiting every inch of church in Rome," Anne replied without opening her eyes. "But you still haven't told me the time."

"It doesn't go away," Art complained, panic breaking through the thin veneer of his composure. "Do I have a halo or is it just my imagination?"

Anne sighed and removed the pillow, opened her eyes and studied the cracks in the ceiling which formed a psychedelic pattern. "You promised to let me sleep on this trip as long as I wanted. Just once! But you don't let me!"

Art stood motionless, watching the halo in the mirror. Panic rose in him like floodwater.

"What's that thing over your head?" Anne asked, suddenly wide awake. "It looks like a halo!"

"Then you see it too!" Art felt a cold hand gripping his throat.

"Yes. Sit down. Let me catch it." Anne jumped out of bed, picked up the pillow and quickly dumped it on Art's head, then fished for the luminous ring, only to withdraw her hand empty. Anxiously Art watched her in the mirror.

"My God!" he wailed. "I'm no saint!"

"What you got has nothing to do with saintliness," Anne said. "You must've gotten it in one of those churches. What do we know what kind of bugs they carry!"

"Can you see me back home addressing the Elks with a halo?" Art asked, exposing his fear.

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"We are American citizens, aren't we?"

"Big deal," Art replied. "How does that help me?"

"What does an American citizen do when he is in trouble in a foreign country? He goes to his consul for help."

"And the American consul is going to take that halo off," Art sneered, having found an outlet for his misery.

"It might not be the first time that the consul has been faced with a problem like yours. We came here in good faith, spending good American dollars! Those Italians can't do that to us!"

"I'm sure the Pope could get rid of it."

"If that's the case, then the consul has to talk to the Pope," Anne said resolutely, slipping on her bra and pantyhose. "It doesn't hurt, does it?"

"No," Art said. "It's a cold light. I wonder if I could wash it off in the shower."

"Try it. In the meantime I'll get dressed," Anne said, putting on her white dress which made her look almost adolescent.

The spray of water which Art poured on the halo made it shine brighter.

"I can't show myself anywhere like this," Art shouted from the bathroom and returned dejectedly to Anne.

"Wear your hat," Anne suggested, "and keep it on."

There was a faint glow around the rim of the Stetson, but only people who would know what to look for could see it.

The street noises enwrapped Art like a blanket. The Roman air was trembling with heat. Art felt marked. Life suddenly had taken on a grim aspect. This wasn't like a cold or like any other honest communicable disease; this was something unknown, and like everything unknown, it contained terror. For a moment Art took off his hat.

"Does it show in the sun?" he asked Anne.

At that moment Ben Schwartz and his wife Florence left the Hotel Quirinale. Art quickly put on his hat.

Florence exlaimed, "I could've sworn I saw a halo around your head. Ben saw it too."

Ben Schwartz tried to look under Art's hat, but Art stepped out of his reach.

"That's what I'm telling Anne, I'm kind of an angel," Art succeeded in laughing.

"You had a ring of light around your head," Ben said. "I'm in the small-appliance business. I know an electric aureole when I see one."

Art waved frantically at a taxi, which stopped. He quickly jumped inside, followed by Anne.

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"The American consulate, Via Veneto," he shouted, and the taxi took off, leaving Ben and Florence bewildered.

"Unfriendly," Ben remarked. "But I could've sworn he had a luminous ring around his head."

"It's the heat," Florence said. "It aggravates everybody. If I had known what Rome is like in May, I'd have booked that charter flight for October."

Harry McWilliams, the vice-consul, passed his eyes over the two American tourists who sat opposite him in the large room, then let his gaze wander to the big electric clock over the row of files. He sized up his visitors: middle-class Americans, the wife still pretty, the man a bore who didn't even take off his hat. People had to be treated with glacial courtesy, to get rid of them fast.

"Aren't you uncomfortable?" McWilliams asked with a slight diplomatic gesture toward Art's hat.

"Very," Art confessed. "But I'm forced to keep it on."

McWilliams tensed. The man might be afflicted with a disease which he hid under his hat. His finger on the intercom switch to call for assistance if necessary, McWilliams asked, "Can you tell me why?"

Slowly Art took off the Stetson.

"What is that?" McWilliams asked, startled by the luminous circle around Art's head.

"You tell me," Art replied.

Fascinated, McWilliams got up and walked closer to the mysterious illumination.

"How do you do it?"

"I don't," Art said. "I got it."

"It looks like a halo."

"That's what it is," Art replied, his suspicion verified that the vice-consul was not acquainted with this peculiar phenomenon. McWilliams tried to touch the halo, but it had no substance.

"Fascinating!" McWilliams exclaimed.

"Maybe to you, but not to me," Art said, losing his composure.

"How in heaven did it happen?"

"It didn't happen in heaven, I got it in Rome!" Art's despair was changing into anger. "We are American citizens. We need help. Your job is to tell us what to do."

"It has never happened before," McWilliams said. A man with a halo! he thought. Maybe the State Department could use him as a member of a peace mission to Russia or China.

"Anne believes that I picked it up in one of the local churches."

"The reek of incense and things like that," Anne said,

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unable to suppress her impatience with the vice-consul's inefficiency. "All those statues have halos. One must've attached itself to Art."

McWilliams felt his authority melt away and quickly pushed down the intercom button. "Helen, ask Dr. Collini to come to my office right away." He turned to his visitors. "Dr. Collini is our consular physician in residence. Yours seems to be a medical problem. Being Italian, he will know what to do about halos." McWilliams shifted the responsibilities to the medical profession.

"We haven't much time to get rid of that thing," Art said. "Our plane leaves on Sunday. This is worse than having the measles. It might even be contagious."

McWilliams quickly moved his chair to the wall and laughed uncomfortably. "I hope not. Can you imagine the employees of the consulate sporting halos?"

Dr. Collini entered, looking like an Italian actor.

"This is Mr. Brown from New York," McWilliams introduced. "He just discovered that he has a halo. Of course he can't return home in this condition. Do you know of any cases like his?"

His face drained of color, Collini crossed himself and stammered, "A miracle!"

"Now don't give me that!" Art exploded. "I don't believe in miracles, I'm no Catholic. It's a virus, a bug I got in this city. You never see anybody running around with a halo where I come from."

Awed by the mystery, Collini was not listening. "A veritable miracle! I'm blessed to see it. Blessed!" Gingerly stepping closer to Art, he stretched out a slim, long-fingered hand. "But this is not a medical problem, signore."

"What did I tell you!" Art warily said. "Now he too passes the buck! Can you imagine me walking down Broadway with a halo?"

McWilliams visualized that peculiar picture: "Nobody will look at you twice. Lots of strange people walk down Broadway and nobody pays attention to them."

"We're going to sue the Italian government," Anne said. "How can Art ever go back to his job with the Edison Company with a halo?"

"The Edison Company," McWilliams said resourcefully. "They might use him for advertising their product. After all, it looks like it's being created by electricity."

Dr. Collini had overcome his shock and was able to think rationally again. "I have a solution to signore's problem. If this is a heavenly demonstra-

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tion, it would certainly disappear if signore did something outrageous."

"Outrageous? What do you mean by that?" Anne asked, suspiciously.

"Sinning," Dr. Collini explained. "Committing the seven mortal sins."

"I don't even know what they are," Art said.

"Avarice, Sloth, Lust, Pride, Envy, Gluttony and Wrath. One of them should work."

The doctor's advice made sense to Art.

In his hotel room at the Quirinale Art waited for darkness. Sinning could be done much better at night. Lying in the large bed, he groped for Anne, putting his hand on her still shapely breast.

"Don't touch me! Not with that halo! Are you crazy!" Anne screamed and swung her legs out of the bed to escape his demanding grip. The halo moved toward her, ghostly illuminating Art's face.

"But it's sinning. By sinning it might go away."

"Don't use me for that, Art Brown! Besides, sleeping with your wife isn't a sin."

"Okay, if you don't want to cooperate, I'll sin without you. I'm getting myself a prostitute!" Art said determinedly.

"You wouldn't dare," Anne quickly slipped back under the covers.

"Why not? Ben Schwartz told me that some charge only ten thousand lire, and that's fifteen bucks. We can afford that."

"Schwartz told you that?" Anne switched on the light and glared at her husband as if he were a cobra.

"He's got the information. There's a strip girl; she has her own car and picks you up on the Via Veneto. She asks for ten thousand for a quickie. And then there's the all-nighter who has her own apartment, but she wants fifty bucks. I think we could get away with the ten thousand lire one."

"This is all very shocking to me," Anne said. "If you must commit a sin, why not start with a small one."

"And what would you suggest?" Art asked.

"One sin is as good as another."

"Pride, Envy, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth." Art reeled off six of the seven mortal sins. "And Wrath! For heaven's sake, you've been sitting on me for ten years like a mother hen! It's a miracle you let me breathe without your permission. I'm old enough to make up my own mind."

He jumped out of bed and started to dress, ripping off his pajama pants and slipping his legs in his trousers.

"And where do you think

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you're going?" Anne asked coldly, watching Art grope for his socks.

Deliberately creating the sin of Wrath, Art worked himself into a rage. "I'm going to get from someone else what I can't get from you. Are you going to stop me?"

"Art Brown! I won't stand for you talking to me that way!" Anne said, shocked by his display of unkindness.

"All right, stop me!" Art struggled with his pullover, missing one arm hole and tying himself up in a kind of strait jacket. With a sigh Anne left the bed and, pulling his arm out of the sleeve, directed it into the right one.

"There," she said with motherly patience, got his coat from the hanger, and held it out for him. Art snatched it away from her and put on his hat.

"If you think you can butter me up, forget it. I'll be back without that halo!"

"You better take your overcoat. It's nippy outside," Anne suggested. "I don't want a husband with a running nose."

Deflated, Art sat down on the bed. "It's no use," he confessed miserably. "Wrath doesn't work with me."

"You're such a nice guy, you couldn't be mean even if you wanted to."

She stroked his hair, carefully not to touch the halo.

"And I thought I was acting convincingly," Art sighed. "Which sin do you suggest we start with?"

"Gluttony," Anne answered. "Let's go to a very expensive restaurant."

"But that'd set us back more than the prostitute. It would ruin our budget."

"I won't eat anything," Anne announced, "and don't think you can commit Gluttony in a cheap place eating spaghetti."

The restaurant Tre Scalini had been recommended to Art by Ben Schwartz as the acme of culinary delights, with a kitchen as good or even better than Giggi Fazzi's or Da Meo Patacca. Tre Scalini had the advantage of having a terrace where Art could sit in the sun with his hat on. The restaurant was situated on the Piazza Navone, a handsome square with a Bernini fountain of four figures representing river gods. But Art didn't have his mind on the piazza's history, which dated back to the stadium of Domitian. Art had his eye on the menu.

"Wouldn't the signore and signora prefer a table in the shade?" the waiter asked solicitously, talking with an Italian-New York accent. "The sun is very hot."

"That's why I came to Italy," Art said, pulling down

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his Stetson. "Bring me some Fettucine alla Milanese. I bet that's noodles with meat sauce."

"It is," the waiter said. "But prepared deliciously alla Tre Scalini."

"Okay. After that Pollo alla Diavolo, Scampi alla Venetia, Funghi Porchini al Forno, Tegamino do Frattagie, Carciofi al Pincimonio, and Fragoline all'Aceto."

"Does signora want to share this order?"

"Me?" Anne said, her mouth watering, "I have a slight indigestion. I couldn't eat a thing!"

"Perfetto!" the waiter exclaimed, hiding his surprise at Art's order, which could feed a family of four, "then may I suggest a small Piccioncino con Funghi for signora and a café Fernet-Branca, to help the digestion?"

"Nothing," Anne said sharper than she intended. The mention of food didn't improve her disposition.

"The wine." The waiter was used to women who suffered painfully from keeping their weight down. He had found that even girls of twelve diet because they become too fat where they sit. He liked fat behinds and heavy thighs, but these American women prefer to look like skeletons. "A bottle of Soave Veronese di Antiori? Or a Bolla Valpolicella, which goes well with the pollo?"

"Bring both," Art ordered. "Tell me, how does one become a glutton?"

"Signore?" The waiter was at a loss to understand.

"Bring the grub," Art said resignedly. The halo had killed his appetite. To get drunk might help.

"Funghi alla Milanese, one thousand two hundred lire. How much is that?" Anne asked after the waiter had gone.

"Two bucks."

"For that I could get three pounds of mushrooms in New York. That dinner costs a fortune!"

"I told you it would've been much cheaper. . ."

"I don't want to discuss it," Anne said, hating Art, Rome, the restaurant Tre Scalini, and the gnawing in her stomach.

"I'm roasting. Roasted Art Brown alla Halo!"

"I wish you wouldn't always mention that thing. And don't bend forward in the shade."

The waiter brought the first course and the wine. He poured a few drops in Art's glass and waited for his comment.

"Fill her up," Art said. Anne put her hand over her glass. She looked miserable. The waiter served the Fettucine. Art started stuffing himself.

"And what if Gluttony

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doesn't work?" he asked, the olive oil dripping down his throat, giving him a slight case of nausea.

"After spending all that money," Anne replied grimly, "it has to!"

"Scampi alla Venetia," the waiter sang out, serving enormous shrimp from a silver tureen. Art looked away from that richness, which exuded garlic like a Jewish delicatessen. He discovered a thin-faced man with intense eyes, who was accompanied by three extremely beautiful women.

"I could also try Envy," Art said to Anne, his eyes roving over the bare shoulders and the adjoining bulges of the ladies.

"I'm not envious of the way you're stuffing yourself," Anne said, her appetite having reached a compulsive level.

"I don't mean you," Art said, his eyes riveted on the dark, flirtatious eyes of one of the young women. "I just wondered if we couldn't shorten the Gluttony and save some money."

"I'm with you," Anne said hopefully.

"Envy is a mortal sin, isn't it? If I'd envy somebody like that film director over there, wouldn't that be sinning?"

"Drink less booze and make more sense," Anne said, watching Art fill his glass. "How do you know he's a film director?"

"That's Fellini, or Visconti, or Antonioni, I'm sure. He has the pick of the most beautiful women. Look at those three! Heavenly! Gorgeous!

"Don't stare at them, that's impolite," Anne said, needled by jealousy.

"Just imagine having all three in bed at the same time!"

"You disgust me," Anne said.

"And those three might only be his weekday's pick! Just think what he could dig up for Sundays!"

"The way you talk doesn't indicate that you have a halo," Anne said.

"I'm bursting with Envy!" Art said.

"And I think I'll get a divorce!" Anne moved her chair as if to leave for a divorce attorney instantly.

"I'm only trying to be envious," Art said miserably, turning to the next dish, Pollo alla Diavolo. "I'm stuffed. Have some chicken, please. I can't even look at it!"

"You ordered it, you eat it!" Anne commanded, the delicate smell of chicken and herbs tantalizing her olfactory nerve.

"I must stop for a moment before I gag!" Art threw the napkin on the table and walked into the restaurant, which was empty except for a couple in a dark corner. He entered the room with the silhouette of a

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man on the door. It was deserted. Loosening his belt a couple of notches to make room for his tortured stomach, he took off his hat, watching himself in the mirror above the wash basin.

The halo floated above his head. Full strength. Gluttony hadn't worked. In desperation Art waved his hands above his head, jumping up and down in a frantic dance to dislocate that luminous curse. He heard the flush of water and before he could put on his Stetson, Ben Schwartz stepped out of the toilet.

"I'll be damned," Ben finally said.

"I already am," Art replied. "And don't ask me how I got it."

"It's not to be believed," Ben said, stepping closer to the aureole.

"Say something original," Art said, glad to have found someone with whom he could discuss his misery.

"It isn't electric, but why does it glow? It must be an emanation from the brain."

"I don't need a diagnosis, I need a cure," Art said. "I tried to commit a few mortal sins, but they don't work."

"You tried what?" Ben asked, unable to take his eyes off that faint glow which lined Art's hat.

"Sins, to get rid of that thing. I tried Wrath, shouting at poor Anne. I tried Gluttony and it made me sick. I tried Envy when I saw that guy with the beautiful dames. Nothing worked! So what's left? Sloth? I'm lazy by nature. Avarice? Should I play the stock market and lose my money? Pride? What's that?"

"The trouble with you is, you don't believe in those sins. How do you expect them to work? What you need is committing a sin you really enjoy!"

"Any suggestions?" Art asked.

"Get yourself a dame. Cheat on your wife. Commit adultery! That's powerful stuff."

"I discussed that with Anne, but she doesn't go for it. It'd break her up, she'd cry her eyes out!"

"So she'll shed a few tears. There's more at stake than her emotions. Let me help you."

"You will?" Art asked, hope rising in him like mania in a depressive.

"I've got the addresses."

"I've never cheated on Anne, never!"

"Then you're in an ideal condition. Getting rid of your marital virginity should take care of the halo."

"But how can I convince Anne?" Art asked. It was a situation he was afraid to handle.

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"Tell her! That'll make the sinning worse," Ben advised. "I'll call for you tonight at seven and take you to the International House. English spoken!"

"I really hate to do it," Art said when he was sitting in the large bath tub, which he had sweetened with bath salts.

"You better like it," Anne bravely said, tears in her voice as she handed Art a large towel.

"I'm trying to get some pleasure out of the idea, but it just doesn't jell with me."

"Think of it that way—it's strictly a physical exercise."

"I promise to think of you all the time."

Anne stared at him poisonously. "How thoughtful of you! You sleep with another woman and think of me! I'm honored."

"Where is the deodorant?" Art asked, his teeth set and his pride hurt.

"Want to use some of my perfume?" Anne asked, laying out fresh underwear for Art.

"You want me to smell bad?" He had expected sympathy, not sarcasm from Anne. "Don't let's fight! It's miserable enough as it is."

Punctually at seven Ben knocked at the door.

"Is the victim ready for the sacrificial slaughter?" he called out, looking dapper in a suit much too light for a nightly stroll.

"I feel like a fool," Anne said, her voice choked with unshed tears.

"Me too," Art quickly added, though the idea was no longer abhorrent to him. He tried to put his arms around Anne, but she pushed him away, ran to the bathroom and locked the door.

"You really are taking all the fun out of sinning," Art shouted, "how do you expect this to work if you act that silly?"

But Ben winked at him and pulled him out of the room. The night was balmy. The smog of the day had settled and revealed clusters of stars.

"This is the night for stepping out," Ben said and produced a small booklet. "I paid three thousand lire for this little treasure. *Nightlife in Rome for the Virile Male!* Here it is: Via Grazzini eight. The International House! Got four stars. It's rated like the Guide Michelin: one star, recommended; two stars, very good. Three, excellent; four stars: wow!"

The house in the Via Grazzini looked patrician.

A girl opened the door. She was dressed in black, wearing a white apron around a diminutive waist. The entrance was pleasantly furnished with antiques, fresh flowers stood in a huge marble vase, doors led to

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different rooms and stairs to the upper floor.

"Madam will see you in a minute," the pretty maid said and took Ben's hat. Remembering his halo, Art held on to his. The maid led them into a room lighted by a crystal candelabra, the windows closed with heavy drapes. The chairs and the couch were covered with silken material.

"Looks expensive," Art remarked. He felt a pressure in his chest as if he were at a doctor's office waiting for an operation.

"I bet they accept the American Express card," Ben said. "Then you can write the girl off on your income tax."

"You could I do that?" Art asked.

"I could. I'm in Rome on business, looking for new appliances."

Madam entered. She was in her early forties and plump in an attractive way. Her dress was cut low and showed a pleasant expanse of glowing skin.

"Good evening, signori," she said with a smile which dispersed Art's anxiety. "May I ask who recommended you?"

Ben produced the Guide for the Virile Male.

"Advertising pays," he said.

Madam looked at Art's hat with a smile devoid of criticism.

"I like to keep my hat on," Art quickly said.

"No explanation necessary, signore," Madam said. "I once had a customer in a knight's armor, and I didn't question him. Everybody to his own liking. That's the rule of the house."

The maid entered with a bottle of champagne and three glasses.

"How much?" Art asked warily; he had heard of people being charged a fortune in places like this.

"It's on the house," Madam replied sweetly. "I'm going to call my girls, one after the other. They will introduce themselves. Talk to them, they are very good conversationalists. I'll be back later and ask for your preference."

She filled the glasses, toasted to her guests and left.

"Good champagne, not the local New York stuff!" Ben said.

A well-endowed girl entered and curtsied.

"My name is Isolina," she said. "I come from Sicily. Are you strangers in town?"

"Tourists," Ben said.

"Don't forget to throw a coin in the Trevi fountain, and you will be sure to return to Rome. And please ask for Isolina."

She curtsied again and left.

"Nicely built," Ben observed. "Did you see her boobs?"

"Anne's look better," Art

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said, getting hot under his Stetson. Another girl entered. She was tall and skinny.

"My name is Serafina. I come from Milano. Are you strangers in Rome?"

"Tourists," Ben said.

"Don't forget to throw a coin in the Trevi fountain, and you will be sure to return to Rome. And please ask for Serafina."

After she had left, Ben filled the glasses.

"Too skinny," he observed. "I've written on better paper."

A girl with a dusky face entered, her eyelids painted light blue.

"My name is Fatima. I come from Marrakesh in Morocco. Are you strangers in Rome?"

"Tourists," Ben said.

"Don't forget to throw a coin in the Trevi fountain, and you will be sure to return to Rome. And please ask for Fatima."

Madam entered after Fatima was gone. She had changed into a diaphanous gown which flowed around her round body, revealing pleasant curves.

"I must apologize," she said, picking up her glass. "Most of my girls are not free at the moment. But I hope you've made your choice."

"They are. . .so young," Art said, gripped by a shyness he could not overcome.

"Youth is a condition time corrects," Madam philosophized. "If your taste is toward the more mature, I too am available." She slapped her thighs and laughed coarsely, revealing her true nature.

"I'm flattered," Art muttered.

Madam at once took the initiative. "I'm flattered that you chose me above those young girls." She rose. Art jumped up in reaction. Soft arms embraced him. He felt like Laocoon, the statue he had seen at the Vatican.

"And what shall we do with you?" Madam, holding on to Art, smiled at Ben. "Shall I call Serafina? An extremely cooperative girl."

"Me?" Ben exclaimed, and Art became aware that his friend also was a coward. "I'm very happy with this bottle. Perfectly happy."

"All right; should you feel lonely, just ring the bell," Madam said. Art felt her soft grip tighten and suffered her to lead him away. It had to be done to get rid of the halo; there was no other choice.

Madam took him to the upper floor, past mysterious, closed doors. The silence frightened Art. To bolster his courage he slapped Madam's bottom, which was resilient and not unpleasant to the touch. Madam laughed and opened the door to a room which was

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almost filled with a large bed. Mirrors hung on the wall, and a red lamp threw a diffused light. Quickly Art sat down in a chair close to the wall, pulling his hat deeper over his face.

"Married men are often very bashful," Madam said, taking off her seductive gown.

"How do you know I'm married?" Art asked.

"That little indentation on your fourth finger! You slipped off your wedding ring and hid it like all good husbands. Most of my customers are married. There's nothing wrong with having a wife who cooks and bears children. But men shouldn't be kept like birds in a cage."

"It isn't that," Art said, putting back his wedding ring.

Madam now undressed, and pushing up her ample breasts, patted the bed invitingly.

"Is your problem hidden under your hat?" she asked, trying to figure out this strange case. "Are you bald? Bald men are very attractive to me."

She suddenly reached out and pulled Art's hat off. The halo shone like a neon light.

"A saint!" Madam shrieked and fell on her knees, quickly grabbing a pillow to hide her bosom.

"Get up," Art said, terrified by her surprising reaction. "You didn't give me time to explain!"

"A holy vistation!" Madam withdrew, her eyes riveted on the emanation. "A divine messenger! In my house! With a halo!"

"I want to get rid of it." Art, in despair, got hold of her soft, round shoulder. It had to happen now or never.

But Madam struggled with unexpected strength. "A saint! Temptation! Temptation! Don't! I swear I'll never sin again!" She crawled away from her seducer, but Art got hold of her leg, trying to pull her to the bed.

"But this is the only way to get rid of that thing!'

Again she slipped out of his grip.

"Temptation! A messenger from heaven! I promise to close my house forever!" In terror Madam pushed open the door.

Art saw a dozen frightened, pale faces staring at him. Girls and their customers in different stages of undress had run out of their rooms, alarmed by Madam's screams.

"I'm going to become a nun, and pray for my sins to be forgiven!"

He couldn't find his hat. In a daze, Art pushed past kneeling bodies blocking his way. The world blurred before his eyes. He heard Madam wail: "Girls! Girls! Repent! Never sin again! Never!"

"Ben! Ben Schwartz!" Art

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shouted, running down the stairs toward the exit. He saw Ben's startled face and a mob of naked bodies rushing after him. A girl held on to his leg. He shook her off. Wild screams echoed in his ears. Panic flooded his mind, forcing his legs to move like pistons.

Reaching the street, he raced down Via Grazzini. He felt the hot breath of a mad crowd close behind him. Blindly he turned into side streets, outgalloping his pursuers, and entered the Via Sallustina.

The dark Borghese gardens opened before him, a refuge where he could hide. His heart pounding painfully in his throat, he stopped at a small fountain. His legs buckled; he collapsed on the rim which circled the small basin of water. He had escaped this mad crowd, who might have murdered him. It was not healthful to run around with a halo. If only he had his hat!

He saw a small figure walking along the dark pathway which led to the fountain, but he was too spent to continue running away. Running where? Wherever he went, he was taking this curse with him!

It was Ben Schwartz. Ben wordlessly sat beside him.

"Man," he finally said, "you must've made the mile in under four minutes. A world record!"

"What am I going to do?" Art whispered, his breath hurting his throat. "How can I ever get rid of it?"

"We don't see the forest for the trees," Ben said. "Why get rid of the halo when it represents a couple of million dollars?"

"One of us must be nuts," Art said. "It must be you."

"I'm a businessman. I can spot an opportunity when it's pushed in front of my nose. Can you see yourself in a huge tent—a couple of thousand people who paid two bucks for the privilege of looking at a genuine saint? Every twenty minutes another crowd! That's eight thousand an hour! Sixty thousand a day! You also could be rented out to religious societies, exhibited in churches all over the world! Maybe we could make a deal with the Catholic church. Don't you see, you're wearing not only a halo but millions of shiny dollar bills around your head!"

"I'd have to quit my job with the Edison Company," Art said, not dismissing Ben's idea.

"For a million?" Ben asked. "We'll put you on a golden throne with beautiful girls dressed like angels behind you. We'll put on a great show and take it in!"

"I agree, there must be a fortune in that thing," Art admitted, the mention of money appealing to him.

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"Since I got the idea," Ben said smoothly, "I'm certainly entitled to a percentage of the gross."

"Only of the net," Art said. "Twenty percent of the net."

"Thirty-three, and I will take care of the arrangements and the bookings. You need a manager."

"Thirty-three percent!" Art objected. "That'd cost me three hundred thirty-three thousand dollars out of every million! That's quite a bundle. No, I can't go for that!"

"Art!" Ben exclaimed, shocked.

"No more than twenty-seven and a half, that's all you're entitled to. And don't press me; that's my last offer."

"Art, the halo is gone!" Ben said dismayed. "Not a trace is left!"

Art tried to look up where he usually could detect a faint glow. But he only saw the stars.

"That's terrible!" he gasped. "Just when we were getting rich!"

"How come?" Ben said, crushed that millions had simply evaporated into thin air. "It must've spent its energy."

"No," Art said. "I committed a mortal sin: Avarice! I really wanted that dough very badly. . .all those other things I didn't really believe in."

"You've killed the whole deal with your greed. You should've controlled yourself!"

"But I feel much better," Art said and breathed deeply. "How happy Anne is going to be!"

When Art entered the hotel room, Anne was lying in bed, her eyes puffed with tears of unhappiness.

"Gone!" he said and turned proudly. "I got rid of it. It was quite an experience!"

"You committed the sin of Lust," Anne said. She had had too much time to think. "And you call that 'quite an experience!' "

"Yes, but it didn't work!" Art said.

"I'm sure you enjoyed every moment of it," Anne said, her unhappiness drying up her tears and replacing them with a mounting fury.

"I never got that far," Art said, at a loss to convince Anne. He tried to embrace her. "Don't you believe me?"

"Don't touch me!" Anne screamed and withdrew from him toward the bathroom, which had been her refuge before. "Coming from a house of ill repute! You went there with Lust in your heart!"

"What lust?" Art's anger was aroused. "Schwartz suggested commercializing the halo. I liked the idea. That's when I committed a real sin, the sin of Avarice. And that did it."

"A likely story," Anne

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hissed. "After ten years of bliss! I wish you had kept the halo!"

"I wish I had," Art said, thinking of the millions.

Her voice paralyzed by tears, Anne locked herself in the bathroom. "Open up!" Art knocked at the door. "How can I convince you that nothing happened?"

"Leave me alone, I don't want to see you," Anne cried.

"After ten years of marriage you still don't trust me," Art said and his sincerity and unhappiness showed in his voice.

There was no reply from the bathroom. Accepting defeat, Art undressed, watching himself in the mirror to make sure that the halo was really gone. Then, numb with fatigue, he slid into the bed which still had some of Anne's body warmth. His mind was reeling with unhappy thoughts. How could he ever convince Anne that nothing had happened in the Via Grazzini?

He heard the bathroom door open, and quickly closed his eyes.

"Art," Anne said. "You're not asleep. I know you aren't." When he didn't answer, she got into bed close beside him. "I've thought it over. I'm your wife for better or worse. Whatever happened can't destroy my love for you. I forgive you, and please forgive me too for having been so unreasonable."

Art quickly sat up and put his arms around her. He tried to kiss her, but when he bent toward her, he froze in shock. He pointed to the mirror.

There was the halo, its golden rim floating above Anne's head.

(FILMS, From pg. 59)

tume, suit; props, drafting tools) and a group of young people (costumes, hip or non-existent; props, masks and microphones) in the quiet streets of the West Village. I say "surrealist" advisedly; in my personal system of categories, it is neither sf nor fantasy, but surrealism, and my major quibble is that I find here obscurity where in his writings I find clarity. However the film is technically apt and looks good, and I, who tend to get twitchy at most surrealist exercises, sat still through its 31 minutes. Rumor hath it that the audience got *very* twitchy at a showing at a recent science fiction convention. However, I feel this says more about convention-going fandom, which I've never found to be overloaded with manners or cultural hipness, than it does about the movie.

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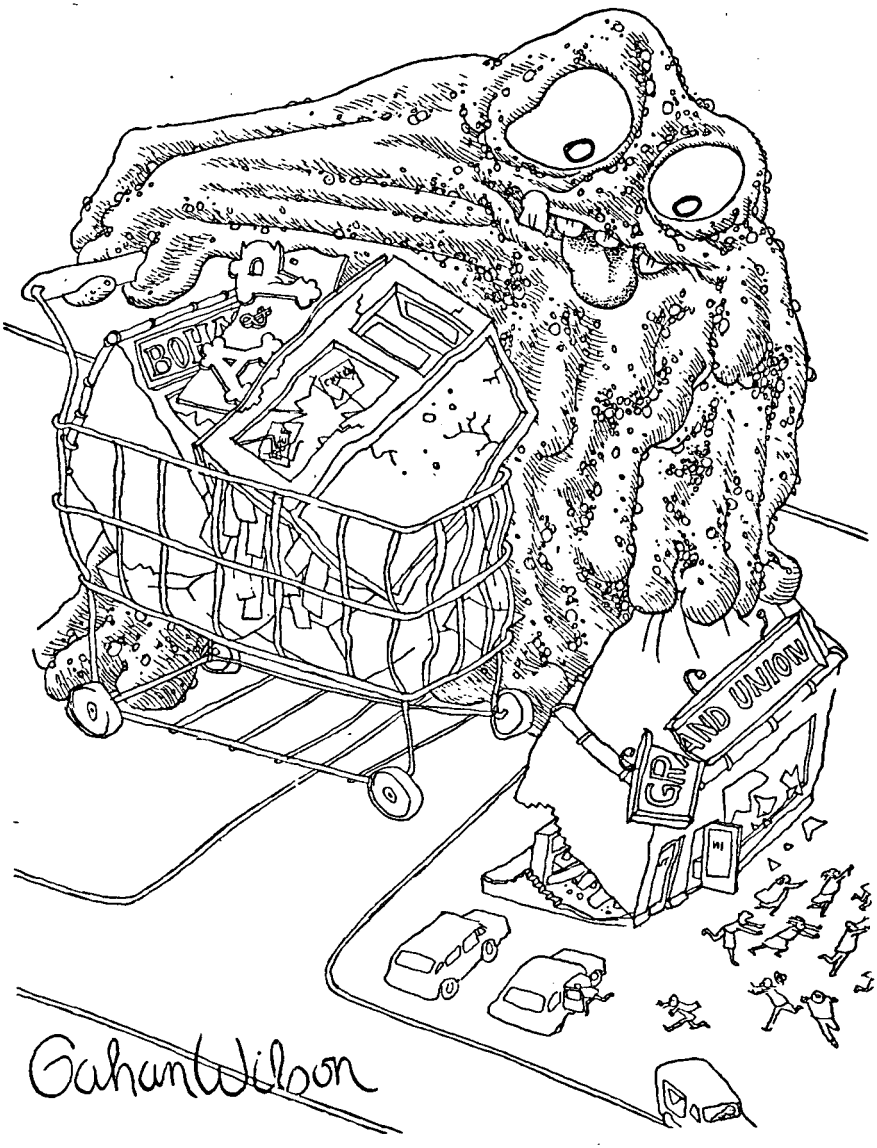

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Paul Walker's first story for F&SF is a compelling account of a conflict among three aliens, not all of the extraterrestrial variety.

Affair with a Lonesome Monster

by PAUL WALKER

HE COULD NOT REMEMBER when it began. Perhaps it had always been there, in the room, seeping in through the walls, creeping up through the floor, A *longing*, he called it, For what he didn't know, except that it was worse at night, in the dark—sometimes, a cry; sometimes, a prayer. Now and then, an image: a telephone ringing in an empty apartment.

At first, he thought it might be a high-level human sensitive, but he had looked so long, so painstakingly, for such a human, it seemed improbable he would encounter one by accident. He considered the possibility of another alien telepath on Earth, but his spy-probes found nothing. No, the more he heeded it—that ululating wail of anguish—the more familiar it was to him. Echoes of his own frustration. He was going mad. . . .

He shut the door behind him, but held on to the knob, wondering where he was going, wondering if any place on Earth might afford him a moment's peace. He tore his hand from the knob, then forced himself toward the stairs.

He stopped briefly on the next landing. A young man was crying in one of the rooms. He was tempted to find him, to ask what was wrong, but he hurried on down the stairs, reproaching himself. His growing affection for mankind was an indulgence he could not permit himself. What would-be conqueror could?

Mrs. Markel's cat meowed at him from the bottom of the stairs. He smiled and bent down to pull its ear. From behind him, from the end of the hall, he heard a door opened stealthily—two hostile eyes upon his neck.

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He did not have to empathize them to know whose they were. He had empthed that mind before and been repelled by its brutality. He got up and left the rooming house, emerging into the silent street. The sounds of traffic were distant, ghostly. Twilight paled on the city. A subtle breeze promised relief from the heat of the August day.

He went down the stone steps, shoving his hands into his pockets, their warmth and nearness reassuring him. He felt ashamed for his flight from the room. It was no way for a well-born Honachan to behave, even if he were a "Love".

He was a tall man, who stood much taller than he was. His movements were precise, performed in an almost military manner. His expression, his bearing, was a stony calm, tempered by the eyes—heavy-lidded, sad eyes.

The Honachan physiologists had done well in creating the body he now occupied, even if it was only a facade, his indigenous reptilian form concealed beneath it. That, too, had been altered with the removal of the male sex organs and the implantation of female ovaries; six of them, each containing a multi-celled embryo in stasis, awaiting his psi command to continue development.

He was beginning to wonder if he would ever give that command. If he would ever return to the ship's hiding place. Or if, by the time he did return, the race, his race, which had spawned the embryos would be long dead.

He stopped walking, alert to the sound of footsteps behind him. He probed quickly and bristled at the response. The man carried a gun which he was not averse to using. He walked on more quickly, around the corner, then flattened against the stone wall of a building. No one was in sight. The city was still, as if no one in it were left alive.

He knew his pursuer. Mrs. Markel, the landlady, sustained her nephew's life of leisure for just such errands—a man-child of thirty-three, six four, in a faded gold sweat shirt, with an enormous purple G in the center.

Trian contemplated paralyzing the fool with a trauma-probe, but that seemed a drastic move. He considered displacing a small chunk of memory, or instilling the idea of a fierce itch in the genitals. But he did nothing. An aggressive probe was a dangerous thing. He knew too little of the human mind, and its susceptibility to the Plague—a virus, unique to psi-phenomena, deadly to all but high-level psis, which

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required only a touch of his mind to set it raging. The Plague which had wiped out the Honachan generations that had borne the first high-level psis.

"Why are you following me?"

Sock Markel went into a boxer's crouch, ham-like arms at rest on his beer-drinker's paunch. "Don't try nothin', Mister," he warned, sounding as if he had a bad cold.

The ludicrousness of the man's posture undermined Trian's anger. He smiled to himself. "I've done nothing to you, Sock. Or your aunt. Don't you think this spying on me is a bit ridiculous?"

Sock straightened up, his fleshy chin extended defiantly. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, Mister."

Trian looked away. The sight of Sock was enough to disgust him. He felt vaguely unclean in his presence. He could not be angry with him. He could only feel a pang of bitterness at the idea of having come so far only to find on Earth what he'd hoped he had left far behind.

"Please," Trian said. "Leave me alone."

He started to turn away, but a disconcerted Sock caught his arm and held on tight. "I'm getting damn sick of you, ya stuck-up *foreigner.* Where you from? Why don't you go back there?"

"Please," Trian said. "You must not touch me."

Sock caught the scent of fear, and misinterpreting it, he grabbed for the gun in his hip pocket, concealed beneath the baggy sweat shirt. "Think you're so damn superior, huh? Well, I'll show—"

Trian tried to pull away, but Sock shoved him back against the wall. He pulled out the small automatic, and without further warning Trian's limp hands became steel fists. He drove one into Sock's paunch and the other into his neck. He grasped the man by the sweat shirt and flung him against the wall. Sock's head hit with a thunk, and Trian hit him solidly in the groin. Sock slid to the pavement.

"Morg!"

The image that materialized in Trian's mind occupied one special confine of it. It was the image of a round, leathery-complexioned face, with white scars about its nose and eyes. The face of a Honachan warrior, its eyes ablaze with malicious delight, its lips simultaneously laughing and sneering.

"Most fun I've had since we landed, Lovie!"

Trian bent down to examine the unconscious Sock, to make sure that he was not too badly hurt. He took the gun and put it in his pocket, then stood up, looked around, and walked on.

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He had agreed to accept the assignment on the understanding that his schizo-defensive personality would merely be a reorientation of his own aggressive drives. It was not until reaching Earth that he realized that the authorities had tricked him—why?—and he bore the subordinate personality of Morg Don, Assistant Chief of Internal Security for the Secondary Region. The man who had twice brought charges of Love against him before the Council of the Prime Region.

"Things aren't going too well for you, Lovie," Morg said, his voice like a whispering in Trian's ear; his presence like an open sewer to his host's sensibilities. "Six months is two months longer than the Brothers gave you, you know? Pity if they chose the wrong men—if they died off without knowing that a million years of Honachan culture was safe."

Trian did not have to be reminded of the fate of Honach. As Counsel to the Supreme Directorate, he'd been the first to receive the astronomers's reports on their dying sun. He'd been primarily responsible for the Joint Action Council of Regions, and he had argued for the adoption of the "Terran Alternative": breeding an army of Honachan/human hybrids to infiltrate and lay claim to the Earth.

"The humans would hardly accept our presence, Morg, let alone our purpose. And it seems unlikely we could continue to conceal our presence indefinitely without a psi-screen, and to have a psi-screen we must have an accurate estimate of human psi-potential, which means finding a sensitive."

"Which you haven't done! You haven't probed a human since—"

"Since that farmer we met on the road that first night, who died in ten seconds. Screaming. I know it is beneath your dignity to understand the pointlessness of slaughtering innocent people, but try to understand that it will take ten years to evolve mutations fit to survive this world as well as the humans. And it will take another ten years, if not more, to occupy it bloodlessly."

"You are a Love, all right!" Morg roared. "What difference does it make what happens to them? Who needs them? This is our world, now.

"But you'd rather have us cringing behind a psi-screen for twenty years. Typical Love gutlessness."

Trian forced a patronizing smile onto his face, but he could not conceal the hate that filled his mind. Twice, long ago, he had killed Honachans who dared to question his courage. Yes, he was a Love. He

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advocated the disarmament of Regions and the formation of a coalition government with all factions represented. Once he might have been strung up by the tongue over a slow fire, but now the Supreme Directorate was too desperate for educated men, and so he was employed quietly, as were other Loves, to advise, to negotiate, to compromise.

"I'll warn you once, Morg," he said quietly. "If you interfere with this business, I won't hesitate to destroy you."

Morg emanated hostility in cold acid waves of hate, but he did not reply at once, and when he did, it was with a quiet laughter. "I hear you, Lovie. But before you try anything, be sure you can finish it."

"You forget who is the *subordinate* personality."

"I forget nothing, you lily-livered freak! Do you think Honach would entrust this job to the likes of you? Are you really that stupid? *You?* A *Love?* You're disgusting."

Trian stopped walking. It was dark, the streetlights lit, a few cars moving on the streets. Quickly, he thought back to the words he'd exchanged with the Council before he left. There had been no mention of "subordinate" in reference to his schizo-defensive personality. No mention of Morg Don, at all.

What good was a Morg Don for except to make war?

Cold fear writhed in Trian's gut. Fear for more than his own life.

"Morg?" he called.

But Morg had withdrawn into his special confine in Trian's brain, and there was only the echo of quiet laughter. . . .

He reached the door of his room and rushed inside, the muffled cries from below still resounding in his ears—"Foreigner! I don't care if your rent is paid up for six months. I want you out!"

Mrs. Markel's constant epithet terrified him, although he'd come to realize that it implied nothing extraterrestrial. Like Honachans, humans invested their regions with mystic and moral significance.

He looked around the small room. The walls were pale green, darkened by age and soot, chipping in places about the ceiling. There was a double bed with broken springs, a dresser charred along the edges by neglected cigarette butts. He sat down at the lopsided kitchen table and put his hands flat upon it. The poverty of the room did not affect him—it was the presence.

He looked around, expecting to sense it, but he didn't. He thought back to Morg's words,

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and the fear drained him. The thinness of the deception seemed so obvious, now, but he had been so anxious to prove his loyalty, to help save his people.

The Great War of Regions had ended a century before, but the Prime Region had never ceased to worship its warrior heritage. There was not the time, nor the willingness to cooperate, to get everyone off Honach alive, and so they had had to choose the one thing that they wished to survive them and entrust it to the one man whose life symbolized it.

Morg Don was a warrior prince of the Secondary Region, that last bastion of militant traditionalism. A nation of soldiers from birth, raised to die for their region, to sustain it independent of the Prime Region, and it never made the slightest difference to them that their pride had cost their species its extinction.

Morg Don was the symbol of all that a million years of Honachan culture had amounted to. It made sense that he should be entrusted with the care and cultivating of the embryos. And what safer place for him than in the mind of a weak-kneed Love, who might easily be destroyed when the time came.

Trian got up and went to the window. He put off the lamp and raised the shade. Across the street a Puerto Rican woman sat on a stone stoop, hands in her lap, eyes to the black August night. He thought of his mother.

She was sixteen when he was born, as young in spirit when she died. A lilting, stunning beauty who made music when she spoke, art when she sat still. She knew nothing of the world. She cared less. She raised her son to recite forgotten rhymes and play a dozen obscure instruments to perfection. She imbued him with a fondness for animals and illicit, but always romantic, love affairs.

For a long while he had hated her. He had blamed her for his father's death, for his loneliness, his anguish. He had blamed her for his isolation from his peers, who expected twice as much from him as they did from themselves, simply because he did not share their predilection for violence. He had hated her until the day she died, then realized that he had not hated her at all.

He sat down by the window, head in his hands. His eyes burned. His stomach quaked with hunger. He had not slept in days, and he was weak, sick with frustration. He knew he was the stronger psi, Morg Don or no Morg Don. Morg's mind was a fighting machine; his was an all-purpose computer. But,

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bit by bit, through frustration and self-doubt, through sleeplessness and failure, his strength had been drained, until he was no longer sure if they were equally matched.

Perhaps Honach was right. Perhaps Morg was the one to survive. According to everything he believed, All Men were *One*, indivisible. The Prime Region claimed one interpretation of that Oneness; the Secondary Region, another; but both agreed on the principle. One Race, One Leader, One Mind common to all.

A Love was an abomination before the Oneness of Honach.

He looked out through the window at the city, hands clasped on the sill. What was the Oneness of Man? Their One Race, their One Leader, their One Mind? Humanity could not survive without them, even if they were too ignorant to comprehend them. If only he could determine that Oneness in time. . . .

The thought of Morg left in charge of the embryos chilled him through. Morg, the man of action, impatient, careless, bringing the mutants into a world of the dead. Billions of human beings dead—for what? So Honach could breed another race which would destroy itself in another million years!

Trian's fingers clawed at his brow.

Morg, he whispered, I'm not going to let you do this thing.

Lovie, came the reply, how are you going to stop me?

He was weaker in the morning.

He had not dared to sleep or ease his iron grip. At dawn he left the rooming house without encountering Mrs. Markel. He was not hungry, but the embryos required nourishment. The sky above was gray, the air damp, cool. Far down the block the park was shrouded in fog. He remembered a cafeteria around the corner and started for it, but he did not get far before he heard footsteps behind him.

He stopped abruptly, fighting down his rage. Any weakness now, and Morg might seize the opportunity for a complete takeover. His head pained under the pressure, his heart was constricted with bitterness. He spun around prepared to kill Sock with his own bare hands.

It wasn't Sock.

It was a boy, apparently in his early teens, quite small and thin, with an odd, oval-shaped head of unruly black hair. He stood cocked to one side, two scrawny hands shoved into the back pockets of a pair of worn bell-bottom dungarees.

"Hi," he said in an unnaturally high voice, flinching

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reflexively as if he expected Trian to strike him.

Trian did nothing. His relief became puzzlement. He recognized the boy as the tenent in the apartment directly below his own. They'd passed in the halls many times, yet the boy kept his head down, his mouth shut.

"What's wrong?" Trian asked instinctively.

The boy shrugged. "Couldn't sleep, ya know? Figured I'd take a walk or something. Mind if I—ah—walk—ah—along?"

Trian minded very much, half suspicious that Mrs. Markel had found herself another spy, but he could think of nothing to say. The boy came beside him and they walked on together toward the cafeteria.

"My name's Alan," the boy said, as if confiding a secret. "I'm sorry to be pestering you like this. It's just that, well, I had to get out of that. . .place."

"You're very young to be living alone, aren't you?" Trian remarked.

"I'm nineteen," the boy said, grinning.

He was ill-equipped to express significant emotions, Trian noted. He had gentle features, ravaged and left scarred by acne. Round, bright eyes, long-lashed and sad. He walked like a girl, his movements excessive, overelaborate.

"I come from Pennsy," he said. "Pennsylvania. Small town, but lots of money in it. My father's a salesman, always off someplace in Europe or Japan. My mother—am I talking too much? Mother says I talk too much."

Love pushed through the revolving doors into the cafeteria. It was a cavernous room, dimly lit, overcrowded with tables and chairs. Two old men sat in the rear, sipping soup and conversing softly in Yiddish. A young black woman sat by the window, chewing a piece of lightly buttered toast and perusing an article in the *Daily News.* A stocky Italian watched her from the corner, fingers fondling a tepid cup of black coffee. Trian ordered tea for himself and two raw eggs; then reluctantly he ordered another tea for the boy. They sat off to the right among the shadows.

"You mind me sitting with you?" the boy asked, and Trian sighed, sorely tempted to say he minded it more and more, but instead he smiled politely. "I guess you know about me, huh?" the boy asked.

Trian glanced at him; the image blurring briefly as a razor-sharp pain jabbed into his consciousness. "You guess I know *what* about you?"

The boy noticed his reflection in the Formica tabletop. He covered it inconspicuously with one hand, then looked up

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at Trian: "Being queer, I mean."

Trian continued to stare, expecting more, then realized that he himself was supposed to respond. At first, he did not understand, then recalled "queer" was a human slang expression denoting a homosexual male. He had no experience with human sex relations. They were incomprehensible to him. "Oh," he said.

The boy slouched in the chair. His slovenliness irritated Trian, who unconsciously straightened his own posture.

"I'm not ashamed of it," the boy said. "Not any more. I mean, being gay, that's just the way it is, you know? Yes, sir. I made up my mind. My old man doesn't know. My old lady doesn't care. But everybody else. . .back there. I had to get out. Oh, the kids quit picking on me, and I didn't mind the talk. It was just—am I boring you?—yeah, I guess I am... Well, you know, back home I was just a freak. I didn't want that. Here, I figured it would be different; but, you know, it isn't, really."

Trian sighed noisily, then apologized with a glance. The pain in his head was intense. He laughed silently to himself thinking of the ordeal he was enduring while he sat here with this strange youngster, supposed to sympathize with problems he knew nothing about. Still, he listened, he nodded, he smiled.

"Mrs. Markel, she hates you," the boy said.

"Why?" Trian asked.

"I don't think she knows. I don't think any of them know, really. I guess they're bored. Hating gives them something to do."

Logically, the answer made no sense, yet somehow it satisfied the question. Trian smiled. He was suddenly glad the boy was there.

"Look, I'm sorry I'm taking up your time, Mr. . . .Trian? I just had to talk to somebody; and after all the rotten things she said about you, well, I thought—I couldn't stay in that room any more. I was going nuts. It's. . .haunted."

"Haunted?" Trian asked.

The boy shrugged. "It hit me the first night, like a. . .sad sort of. . ."

"Longing," Trian offered.

The boy's eyes brightened. "Yeah, maybe so. Awful sad. When I was six or seven, I remember my mother went to work nights. She always said I shouldn't be afraid, and I always was. I used to sit up nights in the dark and call for her. I knew she wasn't there, but I called and called. I think I figured if I hurt bad enough she'd just have to be there.

"The neighbors complained,

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so she promised she'd call every night. It was a toll call, so she said not to pick up the receiver—we were poor then—but I was going to pick it up anyway. I waited and waited, but she didn't call. She never called. The fucking phone was busted."

Trian sat back, open-mouthed. Was it possible? Was this boy a sensitive—the *presence*—in the room? He leaned closer, restraining himself from an immediate probe. The odds against the coincidence were enormous, but then he had exposed his empathetic nervous system day and night for months to thousands of possible transmissions.

Morg, he thought. You heard. I must have time.

—All right.

Morg?

—All right, I said. You've got time. I'm in no rush.

This is a trick.

Yes, it is.

Morg. . .

I promise nothing, Lovie.

Trian looked again at the boy, who stared back, alarmed. "You okay?"

Trian nodded, smiling. He felt strength return. The pain eased. "I have to talk to you, Alan. Very seriously. Very strangely, perhaps. Do you trust me?"

The boy nodded.

Trian compelled himself to relax. Morg or no Morg, he would never have this chance again. He would never forgive himself if he lost it. He did not dare to transmit a direct probe, but one by one, he lowered his defenses, channeling what powers he possessed *into* his empathetic system. He closed his eyes and sank back into the darkness of his mind, allowing the boy's primitive psi-potential to reach him—the presence, the longing, an image: a telephone ringing in an empty apartment.

"Hey!" the boy said, but Trian could not reply, not now, and maintain the contact. *Concentrate.* You must—

"Trian!"

The contact snapped. Trian could not pursue it. He lowered another defense and another. It did no good.

—Useless! Useless!

Morg, in the name of your Region, listen. . .

—Enough, Lovie, enough.

Frantically, Trian attempted to reassert the defenses, but Morg surged forward, his considerable powers fresh and strong, sweeping over and through Trian's consciousness, crushing, smashing, obliterating Trian's resistance. He could not fight or beg or scream. He writhed in a void, a shriveling consciousness of agony.

He came struggling up through a dark dream mire.

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There were colors first, then random, meaningless sounds; and suddenly a glare of light. He became aware of who and where he was, pinned helplessly under the weight of Morg's consciousness, called in the special confine of what had been his own brain.

"See," Morg was saying. "There's nothing to be afraid of. I like to come here mornings and be alone."

Hands deep in his pockets, the boy glanced about at the rolling mounds of grass, the passive trees. A gray mist, damp and cheerless, shifted over the moist earth. He looked again at what he assumed to be Trian. "You're sure you're okay? You're different somehow."

Morg walked on, ignoring the question. He was looking for a secluded place to probe the boy, to dispose of the body if things went wrong. The Plague died with its first victim if he did not live long enough to infect another.

—Morg? Trian called, but he was too weak.

Morg stopped walking, his hand pressed to his head, his eyes darting from side to side. His recent triumph over Trian paled before a rising, inexplicable anxiety, the same anxiety that had permitted Trian's strength to grow.

The boy put a hand on his arm. "What's wrong?"

Morg tore away from the hand. "Why do you keep asking that? What—what were we talking about? Wasn't I telling you where I came from?"

"I'd like to hear about that."

Trian attempted to move in his psychic cell. He found he could move a mental finger here, a sensual toe there; and each time he moved, Morg squirmed restlessly. He was not yet aware of Trian's return, being too preoccupied with the boy and somewhat humiliated at his unexpected awkwardness.

"Like you," Morg said, "I left home because I didn't belong. I was different, and I had no right to be."

The boy nodded, plainly uncomfortable. He maintained a distance between them, his glances lingering longer each time. Trian noticed it and prayed the boy would not panic. Morg was frightened, but determined to master his fear. He was capable of anything.

"You are different," the boy said.

Morg clenched one fist, which he hid behind his back. "*No* man is different. You are old enough to understand that. All Men are One, indivisible. It is their Oneness that makes them men. One Race, One Leader, One Mind to bind them together. If that is not so, then the species is finished. I know. I've seen a world die of it."

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The boy laughed inappropriately, then blushed. "Are you a Marxist or something?"

"You couldn't understand. You're too young," Morg huffed.

"Maybe, but I think you're wrong. I used to think everyone was the same. 'One.' I used to think all I had to do was to measure up. I tried. Honest. I beat my goddamn brains out trying. But now I don't think there is any measure. I think every man lives in his own private room, the door locked, and a telephone that doesn't work.

"I don't think there is any definition of a man, or a human being. I think whatever it is that separates us from the animals was a fluke. It happened and here we are and nobody knows what to make of it. I think we're all freaks, Trian. All of us. Everybody in his own way.

"I think we envy the animals. I think that's what society is all about; the ant hill, the hive, the nest—back to nature!"

Morg attempted to laugh contemptuously, but there was no humor left in him. He had had no family, no friends, outside of the army. He had grown up, lived, and expected to die in a tightly ordered, always public world where he was never alone, never without someone to tell him when and what to think. Suddenly, he was very much alone—all the Earth at his disposal, with only himself to give the orders, and the unexpected vastness and freedom of it sickened him with fear.

"I'm learning how to be different," the boy went on. "I think that's what growing up really means. Being who you are, where you are, and not letting it get you down, or taking it out on somebody else."

The boy's words came through to Trian with their full empathetic significance. He felt himself bathed in a flow of unexpectedly congenial meanings and emotions—some alien, dark, even grotesque, but others that were warm, kindly, intelligent, and Honachan. Much of their content was incomprehensible to him, but their emotional connotations were virtually identical to his own.

Was it possible Honach was wrong? Were all men, Honachans and humans, separate and unique entities, tormented by their separateness, terrified by their loneliness? Did the dread of that loneliness drive them to create, and ruthlessly sustain, totalitarian regimes like Honach?

Morg! he cried. Listen. Listen to the boy.

Morg stopped, his hand again to his head. He was trembling

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visibly, his mouth dry, bitter-tasting.

—Lovie?

Trian felt his own strength grow. His self-doubt had fed Morg's ambition, but the self-doubt was gone. Conviction brought new strength.

"What's *wrong?*" the boy demanded.

Morg looked at him, frightened; no time, no time, he thought. They stood in a grove of trees, the world around Morg like a gravityless void in which he might drift off into oblivion. Nothing was solid to him any longer, nothing real, except fear. Death was a nightmarish prospect, without honor.

Sensing danger, the boy backed away. Morg lunged at him, and Trian surged against Morg's consciousness. The warrior quivered under the impact. He turned from the boy and sent a trauma-probe against Trian, but instinctively the boy struck him a sharp right to the cheek.

Morg grunted, caught off balance and sent staggering. Trian sent a second and a third trauma-probe against him. Morg grasped his head in his hands and screamed in rage.

The boy watched, unable to move. Morg rushed at him, catching him by the throat. The boy kicked out at his ankle, but the grip held. Morg was losing strength, but too slowly.

Trian relented from his trauma-probes. He quit struggling. One possibility remained, and it occurred to him too quickly to consider the consequences.

Morg mustered a feeble psi-probe and directed it at the boy's brain. Before he could release it, the boy slipped out of his grasp. He picked up a sharp-edged rock and smacked Morg on the side of the head. The probe was dissipated in space. Morg's temper flared. He struck the boy to the ground. In fury, he mustered another probe, backed by all the power he had.

It was more than Trian had hoped for.

Instantly, the weight of Morg's consciousness was lifted from his own. It thrust outwards to the borders of its own mind—and Trian surged forward behind it, matching its momentum, engaging it, shoving, hurtling it into space.

Morg was thrown from his own mind into the boy's.

The alien minds met and merged in one violent, self-devouring vortex of incompatibility. The boy's body jerked and leaped and flung itself to the ground in convulsions, its fingers tearing at its own eyes and ears and mouth, as if it were trying to tear its own head from its shoulders.

And there was a cry, a

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scream, of agony and despair from it—and it was dead.

He left the park unseen. He would return to the room, pack his things, then leave the city. He would return to the ship and mature the embryos. Then he would destroy the ship and everything on it. And, in time, he would destroy himself.

He walked on down the silent street, reordering events in his mind.

Eventually the humans would discover the alien hybrids among them, but he would take precautions that they would not discover them too soon, not before it was too late. What could they do? Who among them could dispute the hybrids' right to live as one of them? Who among them could separate what was human, what Honachan?

As he reached the stone steps of the rooming house, he stopped to look back at the park, the fog lifting, the sun gleaming off the trees. He remembered the boy and winced in anguish.

Who was to say what was human, what was alien, when all men were monsters.

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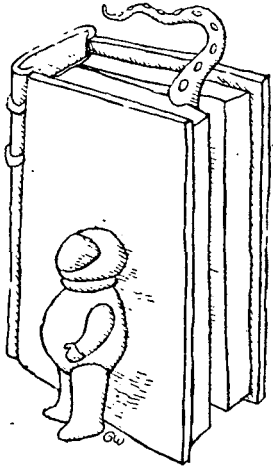
JAMES BLISH

BOOKS

NO ONE GOES THERE NOW, William H. Walling; Doubleday, 248 pp., $5.95
ABSOLUTE ZERO, Ernest Tidyman; Dial Press, 182 pp., $5.95
THE ECLIPSE OF DAWN, Gordon Eklund; Ace Special, 221 pp., 75¢
THE FLYING SORCERERS, David Gerrold and Larry Niven; Ballantine Books, 316 pp., 95¢
UNIVERSE DAY, K. M. O'Donnell; Avon Books, 160 pp., 75¢
SLEEPWALKER'S WORLD, Gordon R. Dickson; Lippincott, 203 pp., $5.95



NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT to expect a first novel, even a first sf novel, to be brilliantly original, not even the author. The ambitious first novelist often tries to evade this fact of evolution under a smokescreen of stylistic tricks (few of which, as it usually turns out, are original either); the sensible one, if he has any knowledge of the track records of his predecessors, concentrates on competence, telling his story as dramatically, economically and above all clearly as he can, knowing that the practice will stand him in good stead when the lighning bolt of an original idea an idea peculiarly his, does finally strike.

William H. Walling by this definition is clearly a sensible man, pretty sure of his competence and ready to put it through its paces without pretentiousness.

The ingredients: Somewhere around the year 4000, a world state has been established and has revived the Code Duello as a means of siphoning off the aggressive instincts which otherwise create wars. Interstellar colonies, after being established by an elite corps, are populated by convicts. One such planet, a highly desirable one named Dan, contains the ruins of a very advanced civilization, and is now populated by a bucolic

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race which is also apparently very old, but has no technology. At first the Danii, some of whose conferences the reader is allowed to overhear, have no objection to the human settlement of the planet, but when the colony is established enough to allow duelling to be resumed, they start kidnapping the victors. A few of the victims are returned by the Higher Ones, but practically mindless. When the governor of the colony prohibits duelling, the move precipitates a social crisis on Earth.

Described this baldly, the novel sounds like a melange of Heinlein, Juttner and Moore, and in fact I could find not a single new idea in it. Nevertheless, the mix is a good one, told with considerable zest, a good ear for dialogue and a feeling for dramatic pacing. I found the reason given for the duelling as incredible as I did when I first encountered it—after all, it isn't aggressive instincts in individuals of the populace which cause wars, and government officials are exempt from the Code—and the Danii's final solution makes no sense. But I read the book through with interest all the same.

I doubt, however, that there is enough real meat in it to be worth its price.

ABSOLUTE ZERO is not a first novel, but it is a first sf novel, by a whisker. The whisker is cryogenics, which at the hands of the novel's hero, one Adam True Blessing, has advanced from the preservation of organs to that of whole bodies. With half a million dollars apparently (the matter never is made clear) donated by fellow scientists, he has established an organization for the prosecution of research in the field. He staffs the organization with freaks who exhibit a wide variety of physical handicaps, from simple obesity to a disease Mr. Tidyman has invented. Blessing's motive for employing such people is love—he loves everybody and everything—but it has a practical advantage: their disabilities make them difficult to question in court, or in jail. This might well have been foreplanning, for Blessing's work is indeed illegal: he has been body-snatching on a large scale, and at the time of his inevitable arrest he has 2,174 of them, frozen and stashed away in a disused airplane hangar. Nevertheless, the evidence against him is conclusive, and he is able to beat the rap only by having himself frozen too.

Ordinarily I am opposed to plot summaries, particularly those that give away the ending, but the novel's first sentence (a chapter epigraph) reveals that

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there is going to be a trial, and there are many other evidences that Mr. Tidyman is less interested in getting somewhere than he is in satirical observations along the way. No author gives characters names like A. True Blessing, Bruce Brickhouse and Brandon X. Noose in the expectation of being taken literally; and luckily for the reader, most of Mr. Tidyman's humor is several cuts above this comedy-of-humors nomenclature. I have the impression that he has drunk from the same spring as does Kurt Vonnegut, though not so deeply; the wit is there, and so is the cruelty, but not the pyrotechnic inventiveness.

There's a lot more sex in sf than there used to be, but comedy is as rare in the field as ever, and comic this novel certainly is, and very professionally written. The publishers don't call it science fiction, but it qualifies, if not by much. It's saddening, though, to have to pay six dollars for a few chuckles.

THE ECLIPSE OF DAWN is also a first novel, and an ambitious one. It is a pity that the author didn't think to provide it with a plot.

The material is interesting enough: The year is 1988, a presidential election year in a United States which is in a shambles, including cannibalism in the streets of San Francisco, after a civil war, and the victim of a *cordon sanitaire* imposed by other countries. The narrator of the story is a journalist who has been hired by one of the presidential candidates, named Colonby, to write a book about him; the hero thus becomes attached to Colonby's campaign staff and gets to see a great deal of the ruined sds country, a seething mass of psychoses. It gradually emerges that Colonby behind his public image is quite mad, but the hero is in no better shape; he has a sister whom he has himself pushed into psychosis—a delusion involving voices from the sky, purporting to be those of interstellar visitors at present holed up on Jupiter, but preparing to bring the Millennium to mankind any day now. (It is depressing to consider that Saucerite nonsense like this has already proven so durable that people probably will still be falling for it in 1988.) His motive for this is all too plainly incestuous, though he never quite confronts the fact. There is a Japanese spaceship on its way to Jupiter, however, so the godlike Octaurians are about to be exposed as a hoax, or worse. There is a love affair, and a couple of murders, and—

Hold on, now. No plot? This

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sounds more like the book has too much of it, and I haven't even mentioned the anonymous obscene letters, or the assassination attempt. But the events are isolated, unconnected to each other except at random, and the hero wanders through them in picaresque fashion in a species of daze, a supposedly trained observer who doesn't seem to be registering anything at all. There is a moral of sorts—a people gets the government it deserves—and a sort of revelation, but they don't tie the book together; as a structure, it's a ramshackle affair which, despite the multiplicity of incidents, leaves the impression that nothing of any importance has happened and has taken a long time doing it.

I think the main reason why it leaves this impression is that the author has chosen to tell it in the first person; the hero is writing a book, and simultaneously, we are reading it. For a *Bildungsroman*—a novel of education, of growing up, of a change of heart—first person is fatal, because the narrator has necessarily had the change of heart *before* beginning to tell the story, and so must be a different sort of person and be fully aware of the fact while he is describing what he was like earlier on. There are novels which have survived such a mistake by virtue of extraordinary merits in other departments (for instance, THE SPACE MERCHANTS) but they at least avoided calling attention to their own flaw by the device of having the book be also a book that the hero is writing. (And should you cite Gide against me, I shall say flatly that I don't think it worked that time, either.)

THE FLYING SORCERERS (an abridged version of which appeared in *If* in 1970 as THE MISSPELLED MAGISHUN) is not a first novel by either of the parties concerned, although it is the first one I've encountered in which David Gerrold had a hand. All the same, it embodies a beginner's mistake: it is by intention—and mostly, in execution—a comedy, and it goes on far too long, pounding its primary joke down into the ground without mercy, with the fundamental humorlessness of a performer with only one *schtick* in his repertoire. It was funnier and better in its cut version, and there aren't many novels of which one can say that they were improved by UPD's blue paint-brush.

The central situation is a funny one: an Earthman lands a one-man scout craft in the midst of a primitive, tribal society, is taken for a wizard, falls afoul of the local wizard who manages to destroy the

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scout-craft, and in his efforts to get back to his mother-ship introduces to the society such amenities as flying and a monetary system, as well as names for women. The story is told from the point of view of the chief of the village on which the scout-craft descends, and much of the fun lies in figuring out what the Earthman is actually doing as it is described by the magic-oriented narrator.

There's lot of room for games and mild satire in this frame, but there is also such a thing as knowing where to stop, a lesson Messrs. Gerrold and Niven have yet to learn; 316 closely-set pages of persiflage is an enormous overdose. Some of the jokes, furthermore (as the punning titles forewarn) are one-shots—two bicycle-makers are named Wilville and Orbur; and others are in-jokes—most of the other characters are named after sf writers; there are thirteen such packed into one page alone. Ordinarily, such Tuckerisms can do no harm—the few knowledgeable readers will catch them, and those that don't haven't missed anything—but Gerrold and Niven make a major mystery of the real name of their Earthman (which I won't reveal, except to say that it turns up, in the clear, in several Kingsley Amis novels), and it turns out to play no role at all in the story.

Funny the book often is, and as I remarked above, this is a rare quality in science fiction. But gentlemen, please—a joke ought to be short and pointed, not laid on like a flail.

Avon calls UNIVERSE DAY a "brilliant new novel," thus, if I may paraphrase Damon Knight, making three errors in three words. Brilliant it is not; the author begins it by telling the same minor anecdote nine times, in almost identical phrases, and what follows this numbing performance is almost equally glum and lightless. Nor is it new, except in book form, though an attempt has been made to jazz it up with headlines out of ULYSSES, present-tense narrative, and dollops of grimly blunt pornography. Finally, it is not a novel, but a collection of completely unrelated short stories, masquerading with remarkable clumsiness as a history of interplanetary and interstellar exploration from 2119 to 2311. As an entity, the book resembles nothing so much as one of the most disorganized and pretentious issues of Moorcock's *New Worlds*. There are passing bits worth reading, but it's quite a struggle to stick with the book long enough to find them. Underneath its tricks and its uniform, repetitive pessimism,

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the thing is completely shapeless; a few—a very few—of the stories are good, but the attempt to tie them together and make a unit of them is, alas, a dead bore.

The Dickson novel is his twenty-third, not counting collaborations, and it shows; what a pleasure! The idea is not new—world-wide broadcast power with an enormous debilitating effect upon mankind, as straight out of WALDO as Walling's Code Duello is out of BEYOND THIS HORIZON—but the nightmare Dickson erects upon it, though told in a prose as clean and efficient as Heinlein at his lamented best, could not have been written by anybody else. Dickson, like his one-time collaborator Poul Anderson, is not only so competent that the mechanics of story-telling come automatically to him; he has a primary gift of Panache *Schwung*, flair which makes his work vibrantly alive from the very first page. At the same time—also like Anderson—he has a bardic feeling for the evils, nobilities and tragedies of human existence which sometimes verges on poetry.

There is, however, an important difference between Anderson and Dickson: Gordy's work is in the last analysis hopeful of the human condition; Poul (though he has written several very funny books) writes from a floor of brave gloom which Gordy does not seem to share. SLEEPWALKER'S WORLD is in some respects a frightening novel, but it ends with a glow of hope which is a hallmark of the author's way of looking at the world and the people in it.

The novel is not the major Dickson of NAKED TO THE STARS and SOLDIER, ASK NOT, but it's well worth owning, and is way the hell better than the rest of this month's batch.

Space Posters

A set of posters designed to help promote the space program have recently been created by Kelly Freas (who did the cover for our Poul Anderson issue, April 1971). The set of six posters — in color — are available from: Kelly Freas, Route 4, Box 4056A, Virginia Beach, Virginia 23457: $8.50.

—F. L. F.

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William Cottrell is a new, and most welcome, addition to these pages. His background is mostly theatrical, "including a number of motion pictures, a couple of National tours, three seasons of Shakespeare at Stratford, Connecticut, and five years as a teacher of acting at the American Theatre Wing in New York City. I have also played in four Broadway shows—three dramas and one big musical—none of which have been hits, by the way."

A Hundred Miles Is Forever

by WILLIAM D. COTTRELL

HIS HEART SKIPPED A beat. For an instant it was Sally standing there, waiting for the light to change. No, not Sally. Sally's hair though. Creamy satin in the mist of falling snow. She was looking at him now. Sally's eyes? No, not quite, but Sally's hair. He put his hand out to it as a child might touch a bright butterfly.

Then a verbal frag bomb exploded in his ears.

"You let that child alone, you dirty old pervert!" The words hit like hornets.

Old Pete flushed and backed away. The woman was tall and had no chin—a screaming gargoyle crouching on the ramparts of her righteousness.

Bowing his head to hide the hurt confusion in his eyes, Old Pete turned and limped away. The light said WALK. Without a backward glance, he numbly crossed the street, the icy slush of melting snowflakes squishing in his shoes.

"Jesus H. Christ," he said to nobody. "Jesus H. Christ!"

As if he'd ever hurt a kid. Or anybody else, for that matter. Not if he could help it. Or any thing. Sally'd taught him that. It was just that she had Sally's hair, and for a moment, Sally's eyes.

"For crying out loud!"

Halfway down the block he turned and shouted back into the night.

"Pillbag!"

But it was snowing harder now; his voice was drowned in a curtain of swirling silence. The effort made him cough, though, and he pulled his coat collar high about his throat. He realized that he had to think—to make a decision—figure out his next move. A

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leaden wind was mounting from the north, slapping snow in gusts of crazy pinwheels. He'd have to keep moving or freeze. Already there was a hard lump in his chest that hurt him when he breathed.

"Christ on a crutch," he thought. Christ on a goddamn crutch."

He couldn't go back to his room. Not now. Locked out, bag and baggage. Even all his tools. He fingered the coins in his pocket. Not enough for a flop. Not in this town. Decent little town. Maybe an all-night diner. . .maybe they'd let him wash dishes for a hot meal or two. He winced at the thought. He was a road man, not a goddamn pearl diver. But now. . .Hell! He had to think.

Sally.

Funny how he always thought of Sally when he was cold, or hungry, or bewildered. Even after all the years. Not so many really. Thirty. . .maybe forty, forty-five. Time got lost in the dull grey kaleidoscope of his life—his struggle for survival in a mystifying world—his struggle to keep his identity—his struggle to (he could never forget the words) "make a valid contribution to society." They had been his teacher's words when, long ago, little Petey failed to pass the second grade.

"Retarded, of course," she told his father. "Birth trauma. But that doesn't mean he can't make a valid contribution to society."

And that night, after supper, his father had explained to Petey as well as he could, what his teacher meant; that he must work harder than anybody else to make up for something he had lost.

"But you can make it, boy," he'd said. "You can make it just fine. You're still your father's son, by God!"

Birth trauma. Vaguely little Petey understood that was why he had the big dent on the side of his head, and wore his hair in bushy curls, and didn't have a mother like the other kids at school—someone to tuck him into bed at night, and sing to him and tell him that she loved him.

He did have Mrs. Mimms, though, who kept house for them while Petey's father bossed the big road gangs. She was of good pioneer stock. She taught Petey to say his prayers; she taught him to brush his teeth and wash behind his ears; she taught him what he owed society. Never once did she tell him that she loved him.

"Such a pity," she would say to kitchen cronies. "Such a pretty child, too. It makes me feel so sorry for his dad."

Petey's dad—Big Pete, they called him at the road camp—Petey's god. A jealous god,

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demanding. But for a passing grade, or praise at school, or even S for Satisfactory, reward was swift and sweet.

"Attaboy, son! That's the old fight! Chip off the old block, hey, Petey Boy?" And while Petey stood grinning with pure pleasure, his father would rumple his hair where the big dent was in his head, and roar in his big outdoor voice, "You'll make it, son. You'll run for mayor yet." That was his father's joke. Petey knew that. It meant he was pleased. But as far as running for mayor went, Petey wasn't interested. It was a road builder that he wanted to be. Like his dad. But not quite. Not the big boss.

Because when the long school year was over, and it was warm and spring, and his father would take him out on the job where a big cut was going through a hill, and the great shovels were doing their crazy dance to the toot and roar of mighty machinery, Petey would know that it was the most wonderful thing in the world to be a catskinner. Oh dear Jesus! The magic of it!

"Bless my father and Mrs. Mimms and help me to be a catskinner."

He was nine years old then and in the third grade. He hadn't changed his mind when he was twelve and in the fifth. That was the year his father left the road gang and went to be assistant foreman on a big ranch out West. That was how Petey happened to lose Mrs. Mimms. But then, too, that was how he happened to find Sally.

With the wind whipping his coattails, Old Pete turned the corner and headed down toward the warehouse section. It was a mistake, he realized, to ever come to this town. Blamed fool! He might have known. Yet on the half promise of a pick and shovel job, he'd ridden the bus all the way from Wichita.

"Not even a railroad to this foresaken place. Not a cotton-picking train."

Then the weeks of waiting—long lousy weeks, with every day a new beginning date.

"Project postponed," the office told him then. "Middle of April—first of May."

"Christ! A lousy pick and shovel job, too." That was all he was good for any more, though. He knew that. Old Pete, they called him. Not so old! Broken down pick-and-shovel Pete. Sweet Jesus! He'd have to get back south.

A large van was easing its great hulk into an alleyway ahead. Numbly he followed it. He needed shelter, any shelter—fast. He thought he was getting seasick—maybe from the whirling gusts of snow.

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"Sweet Jesus," he whispered, "let it be an all-night garage. . ."

It was a huge hangar-like place, with rows of motor trucks lined up in the shadows. Behind a glass panel in a kind of booth, a man with a green eyeshade was working at a brightly lighted desk. Toward one wall was a big iron heating stove and, behind it, a sagging sofa. It was almost warm. The sudden change made Old Pete cough painfully. The green eyeshade opened a door and looked out of his cubby.

"Yes?"

Old Pete tried to assume the bluff good-natured tone that meant he was an all-right guy and one of the gang.

"I figured a man might pick up a job of work around a place like this—swamp out. . .something. I guess I've run a little short this week, as the fella says. I'm a mite hungry."

The man looked thin and sleepy. He stared at Pete through blue-tinted spectacles.

"Hell, I just work here. Talk to the big boss. Talk to Jake. Jake's the big boss. Jake!" His thin voice echoed from the metal roof above them.

Jake was younger—thick-set with heavy jowls. He slouched out from the shadows with a toothpick in his mouth.

"Yeah," he growled. "What do you want?"

Eyeshade was still staring.

"Feller here's hungry. Says he wants to work."

Jake spread his legs wide and hooked his thumbs in his back pockets. He squinted little piggish eyes at Pete and rolled the toothpick around his tongue.

"Looks to me like a goddamn panhandler."

Old Pete flushed. "No," he said quietly, "No. That I've never been."

Jake rocked back on his heels. He sucked his teeth.

"What can you do?"

Pete swallowed. "A job of work," he said. Then he was fighting a wave of dizziness and red fog that seethed in his brain. "I'm a catskinner," he heard himself say, but his knees were getting weak and he was hanging onto an oil drum to keep from pitching forward to the concrete floor.

Jake studied him in silence.

"I guess you can sit there by the stove for a while," he said. Then going to the door, he took a heavy jacket from a spike in the wall.

"I'm going out for coffee," he told the eyeshade. Then, lowering his voice, he indicated Pete with a jerk of his head. "Keep an eye on him."

Gratefully, Old Pete sank down into the indescribable luxury of warmth and broken springs.

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It was a big ranch, with windmills and clover fields and miles and miles of grazing land that stretched away in distance to the hazy hills beyond. Ace Conners was the foreman. Sally was his only child.

Like Petey, Sally was twelve that summer. Unlike Petey, she could remember a time when her mother was alive. She could also remember when she could walk and run about. Mercifully, she had forgotten the terror and the pain of the disease that left her paralyzed from her waist down. Petey had left Mrs. Mimms behind. Sally had Mrs. Matchez, a wise and loving soul who taught her to bear her infirmity with patience and a kind of quiet pride. She also helped her to be self-sufficient and find joy in the resources of her own inner self. It was Mrs. Matchez who insisted that Petey come to visit at the foreman's house where Sally sat all day in the shade of her favorite walnut tree.

Petey came barefoot one morning in May. Through the clover fields, past the apple orchard where larks trilled among the new leaves, to the back gate. There, under the great tree, where the spring sun dimpled the shadows, he first saw Sally.

She was in her small wheeled chair, her hands folded quietly on the robe that covered her lap. She was leaning eagerly forward, her hair a bright glory of cream-colored satin framing her face and shoulders. She was smiling in her eyes.

"Hello," she said. "You must be Peter."

For a moment he was confused. "I'm Petey," he said uncomfortably, "but my real name's Pete."

"I'm glad," she said. "I'm Sally. Sometimes I'm Sylvia. But that's only sometimes. Mostly I am Sally."

Petey did not understand. For a moment he thought she was laughing at him, but there was only warm sincerity in her clear green eyes.

"Are you Sylvia now?" he asked.

She laughed. "Oh, no. Not now," she said. "When I'm Sylvia I run with Rover in the clover fields. Rover's my dog. And I dance with Mr. Gilly at Miss Matilda's dancing school. Do you like to dance?"

"With girls?" It had never occurred to Petey to dance with or without girls, but the question caught him unaware. Sally was instantly the hostess.

"Of course you don't have to if you don't enjoy it," she explained. "Some people never dance at all." She smoothed the afghan over her knees. "Of course when I'm Sally, I don't dance."

Petey was embarrassed. "I've

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got a big dent in my head," he said lamely.

"You have peachy legs."

Petey grinned. "I guess I don't know how to dance any," he admitted.

The fun came back to Sally's eyes. "Miss Matilda will teach you," she said eagerly. "She's an awfully good teacher and she gives parties that are out of this world. It's always dance till dawn—at least one. Sometimes it's day and days and days!"

"Don't you get tired?" he asked doubtfully.

"Awfully," she replied. "We generally go to the hospital for a week or two afterward."

Petey stared at her.

"Do you like automobiles?" she went on. "I've got a peachy red roadster. It's got a radio and a rumble seat and everything. You may drive it if you like, but you have to take me with you, and you must describe everything you see on your side of the road. I'll tell you what I see on mine."

Petey was grinning again. In a vague way, he understood that she was playing some sort of game and he was expected to join in. But her exuberance overwhelmed him.

"Where is your car now," he asked in sudden inspiration, as he took a step toward her. Instantly she was shrieking in alarm.

"Oh, no! Don't step there—please! You're standing right on top of Mrs. Pritchart's house!"

Petey leapt aside. Her wail was even louder.

"No, no, not there! That's the barber shop. Poor Mr. Mittler! Stand over there in the middle of that road." She was pointing now. Petey stared at the spot. If there was one thing in the entire world that Petey understood, it was roads.

"Where's any road?" he demanded.

"Right there by the fennel bush," she insisted. "It runs all the way down to the church house."

Petey was on his own ground now. "I don't see any road," he declared boldly. "There isn't any road there at all."

Sally became contrite. "I'm sorry," she said soberly. "You didn't hurt anything. It's there but you can't see it. That's because it's not in this world. It's in Sylvia's world. My world, but I made it for Sylvia. All over, under this tree, is Sylvia's town. And over there is the railroad track that goes on and on—all the way to Paris, France. But you have to look in a kind of special way before you can see it."

She looked up at Petey hopefully. He looked back into the friendly innocence of her clear green eyes, her pale elfin face, the wide generosity of her mouth. Then he looked a long

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time at the patterns of light and shade that were dancing at his feet. The magic began to work. Suddenly he saw the road. There, under the little of sticks and dead leaves, he saw it running straight as an arrow down past Mrs. Pritchart's house to the corner where it made a sharp turn to the right.

"Oh-h," he said. "Gosh! But it sure does need some working on." Then he squatted down and began pulling the weeds out of the right-of-way and clearing away the rubble of stones and dead leaves.

Sally watched in silence. When he reached the church, he stood up and looked at her anxiously.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Keen," she said. "Real Jim peach-fuzz keen." Then almost shyly: "Pete, would you like to come to Sylvia's world? You could go in with Sylvia and you could be anybody that you wanted to be. Would you like that?"

Petey blushed. "I guess I would," he said.

"That's great!" said Sally. "Who will you be?"

"Pete," he said.

"I mean in Sylvia's world. You can be anybody—have any name you like, you know. That's the lovely part of it."

He grinned. "Just Pete."

"All right, Pete," she said. "And what will you do?"

"Huh?"

"What special things will you do in Sylvia's world?"

Suddenly Petey understood; eagerly he grasped the golden opportunity that was presenting itself.

"Wow!" he said. "I'll be Pete the Catskinner, and I'll fix up every road in that whole town!"

Sally clapped her hands. "Wonderful! And Pete! Just think of all the brand-new roads you can build—all over the whole country."

So it began—that incredibly long happy summer when Pete and Sally worked together to give their world the finest roads, the most beautiful houses, and the most fascinating people that they could imagine. It was not called Sylvia's world now. Together they named it Petesylvania, which meant Pete and Sylvia's world in Latin. It was glorious.

While Petey worked day after day with his tiny tools—a broken spoon, an old wood file, dozens of graders and scrapers—and his construction materials—pails of sand, bundles of bridge piers, and loads of creek bed gravel—Sally sat in her chair, praising and planning. A new house here. A green field there. And always an influx of exciting new people to fill the growing community.

Together they welcomed the

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Reverend Hoag, the new minister who preached all his sermons in Pig Latin—and Doctor Dingle who made his house calls on a unicycle. Together they went to visit little Miss Peachy Kling, the Japanese spinster who had set so long on her clean white floor that her heels had grown to her obi. She could never rise again and spent her entire time from dawn to dark presiding continuously at an interminable tea party.

And as the days went by, Petey became more and more at home in Petesylvania and began contributing his share of the web of invention and fancy that held their world together.

"Rover can talk," he said one day.

"What did he say?" Sally asked.

"He said 'Happy Birthday!' Only it isn't my birthday yet. Then he said 'Happy New Year.' He ain't very bright."

"He *isn't* very bright."

"No, he ain't!" Petey grinned.

"Is that all he said?"

"Then he said 'Happy Hooligan.' I guess he's real retarded."

Sally laughed. "Maybe he's a happiness hound."

"What's a happiness hound?"

"You know—like the bluebird of happiness, only he's a blue hound." Suddenly Sally shrieked. "That's it, Pete! He's a blue-tick hound! That means he's the Blue Hound of Happiness! I bet he can say 'Merry Christmas,' and 'Joyeux Noel,' and maybe 'bone appetite.' That's dog language for 'eat hearty.' "

"OK," said Petey, "but can he catch a rabbit?"

"Of course he could if he wanted to. But if he's a happiness hound, he couldn't hurt anything—or anybody. He just chases them for the fun of it—he likes to run. He runs with me when I'm Sylvia—and with rabbits and squirrels, and—with anything else that runs."

Petey was silent for a moment, then he giggled. "I see," he said gravely, "like noses."

The summer drained away; the days were shorter now. The network of neatly built streets and highways grew longer and longer as it spread out from the great trunk toward the edges of the tree. Petey was grading the roadbed of the railroad one afternoon when he laid down his tools and turned to where Sally sat watching, her chin propped on the palm of her hand.

"What will happen when we run out of room?" he asked. "I'll soon be all the way to the fence."

"Don't worry about that,

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Pete," she said. "We haven't even started yet. That road there could run a hundred miles or more."

Petey looked out over the clover fields to where the browns of late summer stretched away and onward toward a misty sky. The prospect of building his railroad, inch by inch out into such vastness was awesome and frightening. For a moment he was silent with the sheer wonder of it.

"...A hundred miles," he said slowly. "A hundred miles is forever."

Sally waited until he had turned back to his work. When she finally spoke, there was something in her voice that Petey had never heard before.

"No, Pete. Not forever. When I go to the hospital in Chicago this fall, it will be lots more than a hundred miles. But it won't be forever. Because I will come back. You'll see. I'll always come back."

Pete carefully placed his tools on the grass beside him; he was quiet for a long moment. Then he stood up and picked his way through the maze of construction work to where Sally sat. He knelt down beside her chair.

"Look, Sally," he said earnestly. "I won't do anything important—nothing important at all—all the time you are gone."

And before Sally went away, it was Petey's birthday. Mrs. Matchez made a cake with thirteen candles, and there was a party for just the two of them. After the party there were dozens of candles left over, and that is how they got the idea for the big bon voyage celebration for Sally on the night before she got on the train.

"We'll put a candle in every window in Petesylvania," Petey said. "That way you can always find your way to come back home."

Sally was enchanted; carefully they placed a candle where it would represent every window in town. Sometimes there were five or six together, and where the church stood, there were two long rows of seven each.

The night before Sally left, they lighted every one. Together they sat in the twilight and watched the fairyland that flickered all about them in the dark beneath the tree. For a long time they sat in silence. When Petey spoke it was almost a whisper.

"You know, Sally," he said, "I've been thinking. When you come back, I've been thinking how Pete could build himself a house—a big house with lots of windows. Over by the railroad where you could see the train go by."

"Keen," said Sally. A tiny

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breeze stirred the walnut leaves and set the flames to swaying.

"You know," Petey said, "there isn't any reason why Sylvia couldn't come and live in Pete's house. That is, if she wanted to."

They were silent again while the candles flared. A sleeping bird, dreaming it was dawn, chirped a tired trill in the tree above them.

Sally sighed. "Sylvia's growing up," she said softly. "She'll be a woman soon."

Petey was silent so long that Sally turned to where he sat silhouetted against the sea of flames. Suddenly he dropped down on his knees beside her chair.

"You know something," he said. "I believe that Pete's a man right now. And I guess if a man liked somebody enough, he could build them a house and take care of them forever and ever and God would be very glad."

Gently Sally took Petey's head in both her hands. She felt the big dent there under the thick curls. She touched her lips to his.

"I love you, Pete," she said.

The next day she was gone.

Old Pete stirred. A broken spring was pressing the small of his back. The flicker from the big stove made tiny flames on the wall behind him.

"A thousand candles on a cake," he thought. "Too many candles—too many years." He pressed his palms against his temples. They felt hot and feverish. It was getting hard for him to breathe.

"This is dandy," he said aloud. "This is just dandy." Then he dozed again.

Sally sent a letter back to Pete. She asked him about Petesylvania, and told him that everything was just fine, that she would be coming home soon, and that he should take care of himself. Petey answered in his round fat script.

"Dear Sally," he wrote with painful precision. "We are all waiting for you. There isn't much laughing in Petesylvania now, because there isn't anybody here to tell us what is funny." Then because he felt his words might be too depressing, he added a postscript.

"P.S.," he wrote in large letters. "Ha, ha."

He never got an answer. The frost came and blackened the pumpkin vines and turned the aspen leaves to molten gold. Petey was back in school now, but every evening he would shuffle through the drifts of autumn leaves to where the giant walnut blazed—a living torch that mocked the setting sun. Quietly he would set about

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clearing away the layer of leaves and new nuts that had fallen on the little town. Then, as the shadows deepened, he would light the single candle that stood for the belfry on the tiny town hall. He had made up a special prayer that he always said for Sally as it burned there under the tree. Then he would blow out the light and hurry home through the twilight.

Sally died in the cool silence of late October.

The wind came one night and blew out Sally's candle, and he couldn't get it lighted again. The next night every leaf was gone from the tree, and Mrs. Matchez stood waiting for him under the bare branches, black against the fading sky. She held out her arms in silence, and Petey knew. For a long time she held him in her big brown arms while dogs barked in the distance and a chill wind rattled the dead leaves about their feet. Then softly, very softly, she sang to him.

I looked over Jordan. . .
What did I see. . .
Comin' for to carry me home.
A band of angels, comin' after me. . .
Comin' for to carry me home.

That was all. She left him there, mute in his blinding grief. Gravely he lighted Sally's candle.

"Oh sweet Jesus. . .God, dear God!"

When his father died, Petey quit school. He was eighteen. Jim Davis, who had been his father's best friend, gave him a job on his road gang. He worked hard. At first he was given simple menial tasks to do. But life was good. He loved the dust and the din, the camaraderie and the profanity, the challenge to men and machines —the perfection of teamwork that were all a part of the awesome efficiency of the road builders. He did his part. And he watched and waited and learned. He worked harder than anybody else. He learned to ride the big cats.

He was Big Pete now—big and silent—as proud a cat-skinner as any on the team.

"Attaboy, Big Pete," they'd yell as the great machines bucked and wheeled under his strong young hands.

"You tell 'em, Big Pete! Twist her tail till she yells uncle!"

But in the long evenings after supper, when the day's work was done and the men dispersed to town and taverns, the old sense of being an alien would come upon him and his heart would ache with the familiar loneliness.

He was never good at playing the boisterous game of insult and innuendo that passed for repartee between his comrades and the various waitresses,

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barmaids, counter girls, and out-and-out prostitutes that were all fair game in the road man's world. He was never quick enough on the comeback—the thrust and counterthrust that was the joy of the participants and delight of all the lookers-on.

"Hey, doll head, when we gonna have that date I promised you?"

"Go to Hell! I wouldn't be seen with you on a bet."

"Attagirl, Gussie! That's telling him. How about that, buddy boy? I guess you've been told."

Laughter.

"That's OK, doll. Who's gonna see you? Throw a gunnysack over your head, and we'll go out to the ball park—under the grandstand!"

More laughter.

"Look, buster, I wouldn't go with you to a dog fight!"

"How about a cat fight. You bring your pussy."

General cheers. Another round of beers.

But whenever Big Pete tried to take part in the game, he always seemed somehow, to end up as the butt of the joke.

"That's OK, Big Pete. You just keep on trying. You'll make it yet." Then there would be silence. Someone would order another beer, and the game would begin all over again.

But he always had the road to go back to. That was where the action was—the big action that thrilled his heart and cleansed his soul—his contribution and his joy. Sally would be proud.

"My world," he would say to himself. "Big Pete's world." Then a feeling of emptiness would come over him. It was a world that he longed so to share with someone else—with Sally.

It lasted nearly three years. Then catastrophe. Big Pete's world exploded. Faulty judgment, something left undone, a reflex not quite quick enough, and Pete was a crushed and broken caricature of a man, supported and held together by casts and pulleys and wires, over, under and around the hospital bed.

They patched him up, but the days of Pete's pride were over. Even the big machines rejected him now. They took a vicious delight, it seemed to Pete, in trying to shake him to pieces. Even his name was gone. When anyone mentioned Big Pete, it was always as part of the past. He was poor Pete now. Pathetic Pete. Pick-and-shovel Pete.

He left the road gang and set out to find a new identity in the confusion of dead ends and wrong turns that was the maze of his life.

He worked on ranches, small

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construction gangs. He followed harvesting for several years—citrus fruits in winter, apples in the fall, and all the beans and berries in between. But eventually, he drifted back to the road gang. Again they gave him mean and insignificant jobs, but it was work that was his first and only love. He was building roads. He made his way; he was not a bum. That was his contribution to society.

That is, up until now.

Old Pete awoke in a flash of panic. He was in a spot now—sick, broke and out of a job. He had to get south. He had to think. He shook his head in a vain attempt to clear away the red mist that was blinding his eyes.

Then suddenly, incredibly, he heard the whistle of a train.

It couldn't be a train, he thought—not in this town.

He heard it again, loud, insistent, not too far away. Then clearly came the clang of a locomotive bell. He stood up. A wave of nausea hit him. The room was spinning streaks of light.

"Hell's fire!" he said aloud. "It's a train—a cotton-picking train!"

He was stumbling toward the door now. Something seemed to be pulling him as he blindly groped his way through it and on out into the snow.

Suddenly his sight cleared, and then he saw it.

Right there at the end of the alley, hissing and steaming in the glare of the big lamp, was a giant locomotive. And stretching back into the dimness of the night, was a long line of bright red boxcars.

Old Pete began to run. He had to get aboard while there was still time.

"Oh sweet Jesus, let it wait for me!"

He saw a sliding door that was partly open. With his last ounce of strength, he swung himself up and in. He closed the door and sank down on a soft bed of clean sweet hay.

The whistle gave out one long triumphant toot; the bell clanged; the train sped off into the night.

Old Pete slept.

He awoke in the warm darkness of the car. All was quiet; all was still. He stretched himself. He felt great. He took a deep breath. There was a faint hint of perfume in the air. He thought he heard the distant trill of a meadow lark.

Springing to his feet, he pushed aside the heavy door. For an instant he was blinded by the sudden burst of light. Then he was looking out over a broad field of rich green clover, brilliant and sparkling in the shining air. And running toward

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him through the bright fragrance, was Sally and a big blue dog.

She stopped and waved.

With a sob of joy, he swung down to the white gravel of the roadbed, and was leaping through the knee-high blossoms to where she stood there waiting.

The man in the green eyeshade was standing by the doorway when Jake came stamping in out of the cold. Jake glanced toward the sofa.

"Where's the old stewbum?"

Eyeshade turned quickly.

"Didn't you see?" he said. "The girl came in and got him."

"What girl?"

"Didn't you see?"

"I didn't see anybody."

"Young blonde girl—with a dog. Led him out that door."

"The hell she did!" Then Jake's eye was caught by something in the shadows. He strode to the stove.

"She did like hell," he said sharply. "Joe, come over here!" Together they stared down at the limp, crumpled body that lay on the oily floor.

"My God!" said Eyeshade. "Holy Mother of Jesus!"

But far away under a summer sky, Big Pete was crushing Sally in his strong young arms.

"Oh, my darling," she whispered. "I've waited so awfully long."

She slipped her fingers up under the dark curls to feel the smooth perfection of his clean young head.

"Oh, my love! So much to do! Our house to build! A hundred miles of roads!"

Then they looked at each other and laughed. Because this time they both knew that a hundred miles was forever.

Coming next month

Featured next month will be Jack Vance's new novel THE BRAVE FREE MEN (Ist of 2 parts). THE BRAVE FREE MEN is a sequel to Mr. Vance's THE FACELESS MAN (F&SF, Feb.–March 1971); it is the second of three novels set on the planet Durdane, whose inhabitants have long lost contact with Earth. Book 3 will be published here in early 1973.

We will provide a synopsis of the first book, and it is not necessary to have read it in order to enjoy the sequel. However, for those readers who do not want to miss a word of Mr. Vance's fascinating Durdane trilogy, we are offering the two back issues that include THE FACELESS MAN at the special rate of both for $1.00. Send $1.00 for the February and March 1971 issues to:

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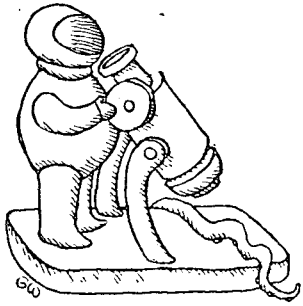
SCIENCE



THE WEEK

EXCUSE

OVER THE PAST FEW years, I have appeared on television talk shows now and then. I have not appeared often enough to become a national celebrity by any means, but it has been often enough to give some people an uncertain feeling of quasi-recognition when they see me.

The recognition, such as it is, is aided by the sideburns and long hair which I now affect and which give me a rather leonine look. Add to that a kind of ferocious expression I naturally fall into when thinking—which is generally all the time—and I suppose I become a trifle hard to forget.

At any rate, I was going down an elevator recently when an elderly lady was the only other person on board. She fixed me with a hard glance and then, using the privilege of age, said abruptly, "You're someone famous. I know it. What's your name?"

I said, trying to smile pleasantly, "I'm Isaac Asimov, ma'am."

And she said, blankly, "*Who?*"

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So much for fame! You would think that events like that would teach me my place and make me less eager to advance my own revolutionary notions in this field or that. Somehow it doesn't.

For instance, I want to follow April's essay on the week with a discussion of calendar reform, and in the process I intend to give you *my* notions on the subject, which I consider better than that of anyone else in the world. How's that for humility?

Calendar reformers object seriously to the calendar we all now use and which some of us love. First and foremost, there is the difficulty that (as I explained the month before last) every year the calendar changes. There are seven different ordinary 365-day years, since January 1 can (and periodically does) fall on each of the seven different days of the week. In the same way, seven different leap-years are possible. Since a leap-year comes every fourth year, the calendars are different each successive year in a complex pattern until a period of 28 years have passed. After that the pattern starts repeating.

Thus, the calendars for 1901, 1929, 1957, 1985, 2013, 2041, and 2069 are all identical. All are ordinary years, in which January 1 falls on a Tuesday. In all of them, July 4 is on a Thursday and Christmas is on a Wednesday. (There are superficial differences, of course. There was no "Armistice Day" listed as a holiday in 1901, for instance.)

During this 28-year pattern, there are 21 ordinary years, three beginning on each of the week-days, and seven leap-years, one beginning on each of the week days. If you save calendars for each of 28 successive years, you would then have a "perpetual 28-year calendar." You can paste all 28 in order on the wall and move from one to the next each year, coming full circle after 28 years and repeating.

This will work as long as every fourth year is a leap-year without fail (as I mentioned last month). There are no failures between 1900 and 2100, but in general three out of every four even-century years are not leap-years, so that there are then seven ordinary years in a row, as from 1897 to 1903 inclusive.

To get a real perpetual calendar that will fit the Gregorian system we now use you will need 2800 successive calendars from, say 1601 A.D. to 4400 A.D. After that, things repeat exactly from 4401 A.D. to 7200 A.D. and so on.

This, you will agree, is not exactly a practical notion, especially since, after a number of cycles, the present Gregorian calendar will

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get a day out of phase with the Sun, so that a leap-year will have to be subtracted.

Surely we can do better than that. Let's think about it.

The simplest thing we might do is to just number the days. We might begin at some convenient time and number them consecutively and without limit. We won't run out of numbers, which are infinite; and if we consider days *only*, and don't worry about weeks, months, or years, we don't need a calendar at all. We just remember that we were born on Day so-and-so, married on Day so-and-so, made a killing on the stock market on Day so-and-so, etc. etc. The big advantage, aside from the abolition of calendars altogether, would be the fact that you could always tell the number of days between two events by simple subtraction.

Such a system may sound utterly unthinkable to you, too mathematical and depersonalized. Yet we do exactly this in the case of the years. We are simply numbering them indefinitely, and we are now up to nearly two thousand in our figures. This has meant depersonalization, too, for there was a time when all the years were identified as the one in which so-and-so was archon, or consul, or in the such-and-such year of King so-and-so.

The advantage of simply numbering the years was, however, so great that all the little personal touches used to identify them (which, however endearing and human, were endlessly confusing when it came to keeping orderly records) were abandoned. Of course, there is the question of when you begin to count. You have to find some important landmark on which the world will generally agree. In the case of the years, such a landmark was found in the birth of Jesus.

Not only are years numbered by this system, but days, too, believe it or not. Back in the late 16th Century, a French scholar, Joseph Justus Scaliger, suggested the days be numbered, and as Day 1, he chose January 1, 4713 B.C. by the Gregorian Calendar.* He called these numbered days "Julian Days" in honor of his father, Julius Caesar Scaliger.

Astronomers use the Julian Day right now, for they find it convenient in their calculations to deal with days only. Thus, it happens that I am writing these words on Julian Day 2,442,252.

** Why that day? Well, Scaliger counted backwards and found that on that day a number of important astronomical cycles such as the Solar Year, the Lunar month, the Saronic period of eclipses, and so on, all started together.*

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But there's the trouble. We can stand the infinite numbering of years, since we're still in four-digit numbers, which can be handled, and we won't add a fifth digit for over eight thousand years. If we number the days, however, we are already in seven digits, and that is no good. Even someone as devoted to numbers as I am must admit that seven-digit identifications of individual days is a bit much.

Besides, the cycle of seasons (one year to a complete cycle) is too important to world economy and to personal human affairs to be ignored. We have to have the year.

But in that case, why not combine the year and the day, giving each numbers and nothing more. Each year would have days numbered from 1 to 365 (or 366, if a leap year). We could speak of 72, 1944 or 284, 1962, or 366, 1984 and uniquely and unmistakably identify each date. To be sure, you will still have six or seven digits to deal with, but you would be thinking of days and years separately, which makes a psychological difference.

In such a day-year numbering, you still wouldn't need a calendar. In fact, you only need a calendar in our present system when the question of the day of the week comes up. In consulting a calendar, you ask yourself one of only two varieties of questions: 1) What day of the week is the 28th of next month, or 2) What is next Tuesday's date?

If you did not care on what day of the week any date fell, you would simply never consult a calendar. But we can't get rid of the week. It is too deeply ingrained in our way of life. What would we do without the weekend, for goodness sake?

So we must keep the week, and we must have a calendar in which all the days of the year are arranged in seven columns.

Suppose the year were *exactly* 364 days long. In that case, we would have those 364 days arranged in seven columns, each of which was 52 items long. If Day 1 were on a Sunday, Days 8, 15, 22, 29, 36,. . .358 would all be on Sunday; Days 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, 37. . .359 would all be on Monday, and so on. Day 364 would be on Saturday, and that would end the year, so that Day 1 of the next year would begin on a Sunday, and the whole thing would start all over.

In such a case, a single calendar, with all the days numbered and divided into 52 complete weeks, would do for every single year in perpetuity (barring changes in the lengths of the day and the year over the eons).

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But the year is not 364 days long but about 365¼ days long, so that every year has at least 365 days and sometimes 366.

Can we ignore those extra days and pretend that 364 days make up a year? What's a day or two here and there? But if we try to do this then the year gets out of whack with the seasons. If the vernal equinox is on March 21 this year, it would be on March 22 the next year (or March 23 if the next year is a leap-year) and so on. After 292 years, the vernal equinox (and every other astronomical landmark of the seasons) would have made a complete cycle, coming back to March 21.

This can be done. The ancient Egyptians ignored leap-years and let their year fall a quarter-day behind the Sun each year, so that the seasonal landmarks made a complete cycle of the year every 1460 years. They refused to change this even though they knew it was happening and knew how to keep it from happening. Tradition, you know.

Well, down with tradition. Let's keep a 364-day year without abandoning Days 365 and 366. All we need do is refuse to assign those extra days to any day of the week.

Suppose we consider Day-365 to be a day that is assigned to no weekday. It just comes at the end, counting as a holiday to be called "Year-Day." In leap-years, there is also Day-366, which is still another holiday, to be called "Leap-Day," without a day of the week. Thus after Year-Day each year (and after Leap-Day, too, in leap-years) we go on to Day-1 of the next year, which is still a Sunday, even though in this case eight days (or nine in leap-year) has elapsed since the previous Sunday, which was Day-358. In such a calendar, Days-365 and 366 can be placed in parentheses to the right of the seven columns somewhere and not be allow to intrude on the week.

While this calendar of years, weeks, and days only (no months, you'll notice) has never been seriously suggested—and even I don't suggest it seriously—all repeating calendars which have been suggested on an annual basis have to make use of a Year-Day and a Leap-Day that are not assigned any day of the week. Only so can we keep the seven-day week from throwing the calendar out of line and making each year different from the one before.

But it is on this rock that calendar reform founders. There are many influential religious bodies which will not hear of any day not being associated with a day of the week. The Sabbath must be celebrated every seven days without fail and if, once a year, two Sundays (or two Saturdays if you're a Sabbatarian, or two Fridays

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if you're a Muslim) are eight or nine days apart, the religious skies will, apparently, fall.

If you want my own opinion, I consider this week-excuse for opposing calendar reform, a weak excuse.* Without trying to make an actual list of the myriad compromises various religions have made in the interest of expediency, I merely suggest that Jesus said, "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath." (Mark 2:27.)

It is possible, then, that someday those who view the Sabbath as returning with the endless tick of a metronome will give way in the interest of sanity.

Taking an entire year as the unit has its difficulties because that includes the complete cycle of seasons but ignores the individual seasons. I am accustomed, for instance, to four seasons of sharply different characteristics, each with its own effect on agriculture, business, transportation, vacation, consumption-variety generally. It is therefore useful to keep track of the individual seasons in the calendar.

It would seem natural to use the months for the purpose. The month was originally adopted in order to mark the cycle of the phases of the Moon and had nothing to do with the seasons at all. Still, they are there.

Traditionally, there are twelve months, through the accident of the length of the cycle of Lunar phases. Unfortunately, however, twelve equal months in a 364-day year (the only kind of year that makes sense in a repeating calendar) are each 30 1/3 days long, or 4 1/3 weeks long. In other words, the months of a 12-month year cannot be made even with either days or weeks.

Oddly enough, though, a 13-month year would be perfect in this respect since 364=13 X 28 and 28=7 X 4. In a 13-month year, each month would be just 4 weeks long and, of course, 28 days long. Each month would look like:

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28

* *No, I'm not ashamed of myself at all.*

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This is not an utterly strange month in appearance. Three times every twenty-eight years, February looks like that. Indeed, February 1970 looked like that.

If *every* month looked like that, the arrangement would quickly be memorized. We would come to understand that the 17th was always on a Tuesday, and the 13th always on a Friday (sorry!), the 1st always on a Sunday, and so on. After a while, we wouldn't need a calendar at all.

But what do we do about the thirteenth month? One possibility was suggested in the "International Fixed Calendar" which for a while, some decades ago, achieved some favorable publicity, In it, the thirteenth month (named Sol) was placed between the sixth and seventh, June and July. In this calendar, Year-Day appeared as December 29 and Leap-Day as June 29—neither, of course, being assigned a day of the week.

It is not possible to make a calendar containing days, weeks and months any simpler than the International Fixed Calendar, and it is a shame that it possesses so serious a disability as to be useless. Thirteen months cannot be evenly divided by 4, so that there are not a whole number of months per season. In the International Fixed Calendar, there are 3 months and 1 week per season and that introduces an unevenness that outweighs all the uniformities.

A 12-month year, however, would have the advantage of being evenly divisible into the four seasons, three months to a season. In a 12-month year, it is impossible to have each month look exactly like its predecessor and successor as in the International Fixed Year, but this advantage is considered trivial in comparison with its season-exactness.

Keeping the seasons, then, how do we make the calendar as simple and as repetitive as possible? Since there are 52 weeks in a 364-day year, there are 13 weeks per season. Thirteen weeks contain 91 days and these can be distributed through three months in as nearly equal a fashion as possible by giving the first month 31 days and the other two 30 days each. The three-month period would look like the calander on the following page.

Again, this is all the calendar we would ever need, for if this represented a three-month period, the fourth month would begin all over again precisely like the first. Thus, if the top month were January, the middle month February, and the bottom month March; the same 3-month calendar could be used for April, May, June; then again for July, August, September; and finally for

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S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

October, November, December—year after year after year.

Such a perpetual 3-month calendar is called "The World Calendar," and there are active movements in its favor. In the World Calendar, Year-Day is on December 31, and Leap-Day on June 31, and both are without weekday assignments.

Another advantage of the World Calendar is that the months are familiar in form. There is no three-month sequence in our ordinary calendar that is exactly like that of the World Calendar (there are no two 30-day months in a row), but individual months are alike. August, 1971 is exactly like the top month of the three-month sequence; September, 1971 like the middle month, and September, 1972 like the bottom month.

Undoubtedly, the World Calendar is, of all the repeating calendars, the best yet, in the sense that it requires the least modification of the existing system. Nevertheless, there are some further improvements I would like to suggest that do require some further modification but end in what I consider the simplest and most rational calendar possible that takes both weeks and seasons into account.

First, there are four natural points, from the astronomic viewpoint, at which the year can begin—the two solstices and the two equinoxes. These are not equally spaced through the year

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because the Earth's orbit about the Sun is not perfectly circular, but we can place them on December 21, March 21, June 21, and September 21 of our present calendar without being out more than a day or two.

Each might serve as a starting-point for the year. On December 21, the Sun is at its lowest noon-day point in the northern hemisphere, while the same is true on June 21 for the southern hemisphere. On March 21, the renewal of plant growth is about to begin in the northern hemisphere, and the same can be said of September 21 in the southern. In choosing among the four, however, it makes sense to give preference to the northern hemisphere, for the large majority of the human race lives there.

As between December 21 and March 21, the former is the start of the upward spiral of the Sun and the latter of vegetation, and the former is the sharper fact. Besides, December 21 is closer to the year's beginning which we use now. Consequently, I advocate December 21 as the beginning of the year, since that will make successive 3-month periods fit the seasons most accurately.

The simplest way to bring about a December 21 beginning is to choose some year and, on December 21, drop eleven days from the calendar and call the day January 1.

If dropping eleven days is too drastic a change (although it has been done in previous history—the British Empire, including the American colonies, dropped eleven days in 1752), I have another suggestion. Let us adopt the World Calendar and, for a while, omit both Year-Days and Leap-Days. Each ordinary year we will move the days of the year one day backward with respect to the Sun, and two days backward in leap-years. If we were to adopt the World Calendar on January 1, 1979, for instance, and omit all Year-Days and Leap-Days, then January 1, 1988 would fall on the winter solstice (December 21, 1987 by our present calendar). Thereafter the date would stay on the winter solstice indefinitely, if Year-Days and Leap-Days were appropriately placed.

Once that was done, a second modification would involve the elimination of the months. The months have no real relation to the seasons and relate, irrelevantly and inaccurately, to the Moon. The World Calendar restricts the variations in connection between date and weekday, but not altogether. The 5th of a month can never be on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Saturday, but it could be on a Sunday, Tuesday or Thursday. Any other date could be on any of three weekdays depending on the month it is in. Who needs that?

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Why not abandon the months altogether and keep only the seasons? In that case each season of each year, year in and year out, would have the following calendar.

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	32	33	34	35
36	37	38	39	40	41	42
43	44	45	46	47	48	49
50	51	52	53	54	55	56
57	58	59	60	61	62	63
64	65	66	67	68	69	70
71	72	73	74	75	76	77
78	79	80	81	82	83	84
85	86	87	88	89	90	91

The above table, repeated exactly four times each year, would be the only calendar you would ever need to have.

You could begin by noting that any day of the season whose number is exactly divisible by 7 is on a Saturday. If there is a remainder of 1 it is on a Sunday, a remainder of 2 on a Monday and so on. Eventually, you wouldn't need to do any divisions, you would just remember the whole thing—and if you didn't you could always look at the calendar; always the same one.

This calendar, which is original with me, as far as I know, I call the "World Season Calendar," and it is the simplest possible calendar that preserves both weeks and seasons. Its disadvantage is

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that it looks "funny." Imagine a month with 91 days. But think! Just by the use of the number alone, you could tell how early or late in the season it is. A date of the 5th is always early in the season—any season—while 40th is always mid-season and 83rd late season.

Another simplifying step would be to eliminate the names of the seasons. The names are parochial anyway. What is spring and summer in the United States is fall and winter in Argentina and vice versa. And there are many regions of the earth where the four seasons don't really fit, where there are one or more wet seasons and dry seasons, or, as in Hawaii, no true seasons at all.

Why not just give the seasons letter-designations? These letters have no connotations. We'll call the first season of the year A. This would be winter in the United States, summer in Argentina, a wet season perhaps in Ghana, not much different from any other season in San Francisco. Then there will follow B, C, and D.

By the World Season Calendar, my birthday would be on A-2, or if I really want to keep it on the correct day, allowing for the change in New Years from January 1 (Gregorian) to December 21 (Gregorian) it would be on A-12. (Don't forget you don't count Year-Day on any day of the week. Year-Day is D-92 and Leap-Day, when it occurs, is B-92.)

If you wish, you can amuse yourself by building up a conversion table from Gregorian to World Seasonal, allowing for the fact that December 21, Gregorian, is January 1, World Seasonal. You will then find it is perfectly simple to rewrite histories in order to give all dates as World Seasonal. —And can you think of anything simpler that takes both weeks and seasons into account? I can't.

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Tarzan of the Grapes

by GENE WOLFE

SHIMMERING IN THE HEAT, the long rows of vines stretched row on row uphill, so that the hill seemed to be a great, swelling wave in an ocean of grey-green. Prescott, the deputy, said, "You think he's really in there? We'll get him if he is."

Brown shook his head. "I don't think he exists. Here or anywhere else. I think he's a phantom of the public mind."

"You bastards write enough about him. We'll clear out some of them anyway." Without waiting for Brown to reply, Prescott picked up the riot gun leaning against the sheriff's car and ducked into the aisle between two rows of trellises.

To his back Brown said, "I interviewed the witnesses and reported what they told me." He checked his camera before following.

The trellises were seven feet high, five wired, strung on redwood posts. A five-foot space between rows was adequate for spraying and fertilization, and for the pickers who would soon harvest the crop. Brown picked some as he walked, purple-ripe and bursting with juice, and popped them into his mouth. To the sheriff, a big-bellied man who had lived all his life within twenty miles of this vineyard, he had said, "Once the harvest begins they'll leave."

"Sure they will." The sheriff's leather belt was four inches wide, and he thrust his thumbs into it when he pontificated. Brown thought: No one should be so damn pompous and right too.

"Sure they will. They'll go back and brag their heads off about what a great time they had here, and next year we'll have ten times more. Either we

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stop this now, the first season, or we'll be fighting it the rest of our lives." The sheriff had looked up at the thrashing helicopter as he spoke, as though just by looking he could tell if the pilot saw anything. Actually the pilot had been talking with Prescott on the radio in the car. Brown could hear their voices without being able to make out words. More plainly the sheriff's thoughts had said: "They lay down in the shadows when they hear him coming, damn them. The only time he can see them is high noon."

Prescott was walking fast and Brown hurried to catch up, spitting seeds and resisting the temptation to pick more grapes. What was it Prescott had told him? "You've written enough about him."

He had done more than that. He had invented the figure; he and Culough and the teletype girl.

Culough was his editor, and thinking back, Brown decided it was the publicity the town had gotten when the pickers were being unionized that had set him off. There had been organizers, professionals and volunteers, from the AFL-CIO and the Teamsters, and sound trucks, picnics, and whoop-de-doo. Coverage by AP, UPI, CBS, ABC, NBC, *Time*, and *Life*, as well as the Los Angeles papers. The circulation of their own had shot up, only to drop again when the thing was over—leaving Culough, perhaps, to dream of those days of glory. The idea of a hip contemplating his toes in the vineyards had been his, and as he had explained it, it had seemed easy and hardly criminal.

"All you have to do," (leveling a big finger at Brown), "is go into Haight-Ashbury or one of those places and hire some kid for a couple of days. These nuts are top news now. They grow pot on their own farms, and they're practically sun worshipers. Why shouldn't one decide to start camping out in the grapes?"

"Wouldn't it be better," Brown had objected, "to have four or five? You know, kind of a love-in."

"Too much chance of somebody talking, and it would cost too much." It was typical of Culough that before calling Brown in he had ripped covers from his collection of magazines and taped them to the walls of his office. There were an impressive number of them, with some of the most important represented two or even three times. Culough's finger stabbed toward one featuring a handsome young man with wavy lines painted on his face. "Get me one who looks like that."

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And Brown had, as nearly as he could. A UCLA student on vacation who possessed dirty bare feet, longish hair, sunglasses with perfectly circular lenses, and a cotton poncho dotted with three-fingers-together leopard spots. It had been the poncho, Brown thought, that had done it. That poncho had given everyone something to hang a story on.

The student had made no trouble at all. He had accepted the deal as offered, had come for two days, and had appeared at the edges of the vineyards whenever it had seemed likely that he could startle someone by so doing. At the end of the two days Brown had three good interviews with local people who had "sighted" him, and the student had gone quietly back to San Diego. The story Brown wrote was headlined GRAPE MAN APPEARS HERE.

The teletype operator, however, must have been influenced by the leopard-skin poncho. She had sent Brown's piece out under a slightly different heading, and it had been picked up elsewhere under such titles as APE MAN APPEARS IN VINEYARDS.

That had accomplished everything Culough wanted. And more.

Ahead, Prescott stopped and raised his riot gun. Over his shoulder Brown could see an unkempt figure disappearing through some hole in the vines, but it was too late to get a picture. The riot gun roared, and a little puff of dust rose in the hot, clear air. It looked like a tiny cloud against the pitiless sky.

Prescott spread the vines with his hands until he had a big enough hole to thrust his head through, and looked into the next aisle to see if the boy he had shot at was there. Apparently he was not, since he drew back in a moment with a grunt of disgust and began trying to raise the helicopter on his walkie-talkie. "I had one here, did you see him? Hello? Mike?"

The odd thing about the "ape man" was that people continued to see him even after he had gone. At first Brown had been surprised at this, but the mysterious figure in leopard skin had become a handy catchall for any hitch-hiker or half-seen vine dresser. The publicity generated more reports, and Culough gave each a prominent spot.

Still trying to contact the helicopter, now on the far side of the hill, Prescott jerked back the slide of his gun to jack a new shell into the chamber. The empty, red as a firecracker, plopped onto the sandy ground. It had a brass that caught the sun in hard points of light.

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"You might have killed him," Brown said. He had tried to suppress the protest.

Prescott was surly at having missed his shot. "Fleeing from a peace officer while committing an act of malicious trespass," he said. "I got a right to fire."

"Why don't you just arrest these people in town? My God, they panhandle on the street; they even buy yogurt and that kind of garbage at the A&P." Brown had not been in a church since he was a child, but he found a quotation, ghost-like, in his mind: *As against a robber have you come out, with swords and clubs. When I was daily with you in the temple, you did not stretch forth your hands against me.* He could not have known what that meant when he had last heard it.

"The worse ones don't," Prescott said, voicing an argument Brown had heard before. "They stay out here in the grapes. You don't see that Tarzan guy in town, do you?"

"He's a myth, damn it," Brown insisted wearily. The young people (in his own mind he did not know what to call them; very few were really hips, but then he was coming to realize that there were very few real hips) who had begun drifting into the area almost as soon as his first stories had been picked up spoke of the "ape man" as their leader, or at least their ideal; and unfortunately they spoke to the police and the press at times. Only a few claimed to have seen him, but they called him "Tarzan" or "Simba" (there was a fad for Swahili). By nonhips he was still reported often, and in one case was under accusation of statutory rape.

"People around here ain't going to take it," Prescott was saying. He was no longer looking at Brown, but prowling ahead down the endless corridor between the trellises. One hand held the radio to his ear while his free arm cradled the riot gun, its butt on his hip. "They used to take all these sit-ins and all that crap, but not any more. People are mad. You think you're going to crucify me in that sheet of yours if I blast one of these guys? You read your letters column. Read your own editorials."

"They don't do any harm. They sleep on the sand in here and talk and eat a few grapes. Less than the birds. What harm does that do?"

"You try telling that to one of these growers. They—" Prescott stiffened in midsentence, his head up, listening to the walkie-talkie. "Hey! The copter's got one spotted. Come on!"

He was off at a clumsy run before Brown could collect his wits enough to follow, then

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ducked sideways through a hole in the vines much as the boy he had shot at earlier had. Afraid that he would miss the action entirely, Brown was forced to sprint to keep him in sight. There were distant shouts from other deputies moving unseen down other aisles. Apparently in response to his radio Prescott bulled his way through the trellises again, Brown closer behind him now.

Ahead of them a figure with flying hair dashed away. Prescott halted and raised his gun, then lowered it again and set off in pursuit. The helicopter close overhead made a sound like a washing machine and, whipping the leaves like a hurricane, blew choking dust.

Looking past Prescott, Brown saw their quarry, a girl in a gaudy op-art smock, trying to break through the wall of green into another aisle. Beyond her he glimpsed the blue-clad deputy who had cut off her escape. Prescott shouted something and fired into the air.

The girl stopped and turned to face them, her arms dangling loose at her sides. Tears were cutting bright channels through the dirt the helicopter had blown onto her face. "Up! Get them up!" The girl raised her hands slowly.

Brown thought: I brought her. She read what I wrote and thought the vineyards would be a new kick, a new game. It was as though the girl were his daughter, and he was powerless to help her. She had blue eyes and long legs like a colt's, heavily tanned. Brown legs, he thought. Brown face. Brown hair.

The other deputy came up behind her, puffing and red faced. "All right," Prescott demanded, "what's your name?"

"Jane," the girl said. She held her head proudly, but the tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Where are you from, Jane?"

"Oz."

"Don't give me any of that." Prescott advanced a step toward her. "Where are you from?" He had hooked the radio on his belt, and with the riot gun resting in the crook of his elbow, he held pencil poised over note pad.

"Tarzana."

"That's part of L.A., ain't it?" He looked at her suspiciously. "I thought that place changed its name."

"If you say so."

A third deputy arrived, thrusting his way through the vines, and looked curiously at the girl. "Better bring her out, Prescott. Sheriff says he wants to see her." Brown took a picture of the three of them

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with her, the flash almost invisible in the brilliant sunshine. With him bringing up the rear they began the walk back to the road, feet crunching softly in the dry sand, the girl erect as a young palm between Prescott and the second deputy.

When they had gone perhaps a hundred feet Brown halted, changing plates in the camera and exchanging the spent flash bulb for a fresh one. Culough would want a picture of the sheriff with the girl.

Fingers drove his nose and lips back, crushing them against the bony parts of his face, and held them there. He thrust out his arms, flinging away the camera as he was jerked backward into the tangle of vines; then he jolted against the ground and was staring up into a broad, sun-darked face framed in straggling hair.

"If you yell, I'll break your back."

"I won't yell." Blood from his lips ran salty in his mouth, but Brown forced himself to relax, lying back against the sand. In leopard-patterned shorts the other towered over him, his shoulders wide as a bulldozer blade and his arms as thick as Brown's thighs. Unexpectedly he bent down again, slipping his hands inside Brown's coat to touch his chest and armpits. "I don't have a gun," Brown said. "I'm a newspaper reporter. Honestly."

The young giant twitched his head almost imperceptibly in the direction the deputies had taken. "I'm going to fight them. You going to fight for them?"

"To help them?" Brown shook his head. "No. I only want to watch so I can write about it later, Tarzan."

The broad face remained immobile, but Brown sensed that he had scored, if only ever so slightly. A muscle-beach boy? Wrestler? Someone who wandered in here looking for a leader and found himself cast in the part.

As Brown spat away blood, the giant turned and loped off down the corridor between the trellis rows, pausing only occasionally to peer through the leaves into the aisle the deputies had taken. At last he stopped, and Brown, who had sprung up to follow, was able to catch up. Through the living barrier, he could hear the deep mutter of the deputies voices.

Then the giant plunged through.

By the time Brown could follow, the group had exploded like a herd of prize steers ambushed by a tiger. One burly officer actually flew, both feet in the air from the force of the blow he had taken, and the ground shook when he fell.

Then Prescott's riot gun flashed back, and forward, the

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stock slamming against the giant's head. A second time, and the wooden butt splintered. The giant pitched on his face. Brown ran to get his camera.

When he returned, Prescott was putting handcuffs on the unconscious man's huge wrists. The deputy he had seen sailing through the air a few moments before was sitting up, moaning with pain as the third officer tried to straighten the suddenly warped line of his chin. "I wouldn't touch that if I were you," Brown said. "His jaw's broken. Where's the girl?"

"She got away." Prescott stood up as the cuffs clicked shut. "What the hell do you think? But we got the big guy here, and he's worth more than all the rest put together." For a moment he looked down at the injured deputy, then nodded in agreement with Brown's diagnosis. "That's busted all right." To the uninjured one he said, "Help him up and take him to the car so they can get him to the hospital. I'll stay here with the prisoner until he can walk or you can send somebody out."

Brown helped lift the deputy with the fractured jaw to his feet, and Prescott asked, "You want to go with them?"

Brown shook his head, gesturing at the unconscious giant. "This is where the story is. I'll stay here." The two deputies left.

After a moment Prescott asked, "Say, where were you when the fight started?"

"Back a way," Brown said vaguely. Now that the excitement was over he was beginning to feel the heat again. Even in the dry air his shirt was soaked with sweat. He fanned himself with his hat, and for a few minutes neither of them spoke. The thrashing of the helicopter was no longer audible.

Prescott picked up his riot gun, dusted sand from it, then dropped it again. Besides the damage to the stock, the barrel was at least fifteen degrees out of true. "Well, you can put it in your story that this kook busted a hell of a good Winchester gun for me."

Brown did not answer. He was watching the prisoner, whose eyes now showed a tiny crevice of awareness at the base of the lids. His arms had not moved, but they were knotted now with effort. Brown looked away, pretending to search the sky for the helicopter, hoping that Prescott would be deceived by the misdirection. The steel link that held the manacles snapped. □

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It hardly seems necessary to introduce Fred Pohl here—he has long been one of sf's most able editors (Star Science Fiction Series, *Galaxy* and, most recently, of Ace Books)—but some new readers may not know that he is also the author of a good number of stories and novels (e.g., the classic THE SPACE MERCHANTS, with C. M. Kornbluth) which were published mostly in the late 50's and early 60's and which earned him a reputation as one of the finest satirists in the field. Mr. Pohl's reputation was also built on the fact that he never forgot the importance of telling a good story, for instance. . .

Sad Solarian Screenwriter Sam

by FREDERIK POHL

IN A PERSONAL SENSE IT may seem unfortunate that the entire population of the planet Earth was sentenced to death. One has, after all, a certain sense of justice. One looks for a quality that could be called mercy. One thinks that there is really some hope that soon or late the present itchy, brawling species would be replaced by something nobler and more kind, and it seems a pity to foreclose that chance. And above all one demurs at the principle of the champion. Is it right that tigers and tortoises, too, should die because of the sins of the human beast to which they are only vaguely related? Is it even right that three-plus billions of humans should be put away on the basis of a close study of only one individual? Not fair, one thinks. But as one of the greatest of the Great Ones caused to be encoded, it isn't a fair space-time continuum, and in the long run one must face the fact that, fair or not, mankind has had it. The total destruction of all has been ordered and is on its way.

Nevertheless, it is of some historical interest to preserve a record of the process by which the human race was condemned.

At that era, which was in the 8×10^{23} time unit after the Monobloc, certain subsidiary intelligences had been assigned as proctors to the planets of a GO star, with particular attention to the planet locally called Earth. It was not a very nice planet, but it had picked up the

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trick of photosynthesis, and oxygen was infiltrating its atmosphere, and it needed study.

The duty of these intelligences was dull, but they were dull, too. They didn't notice that it was dull. They watched the courses of their nine orbiting planets for a while, spoke among themselves, drowsed, estivated in stand-by mode, and woke to watch again. If anything, they rather liked it. They had hardship privileges, so that when they were in active mode they could inhale delightful intoxicating gases and eat various delicacies including, as population allowed, each other. Mostly they estivated in their clay packs, for many sequences of 10^{19} units, while on their planets the usual events occurred. Mountains rose. Seas dried. Great beasts trumpeted through steamy swamps.

Ultimately the event for which they were programmed to watch occurred. In one such sequence the process called "technology" began to appear on one of their planets, and when next one of the intelligences roused itself to scan solar space, it detected an artifact in orbit.

At once all were awakened and set about their specialized tasks.

In mere 10^{7}s of time units they had completed a synoptic study along the lines laid down by Those Who had appointed them to this work. This caused them some terror. The records indicated that there had been a good many artifacts in orbit in recent 10^{9} s, but they had failed to observe them because of their estivation and a deorbited positron in one of the automatic warning devices. It was some comfort to them that nearly all of the artifacts had been cislunar to Earth, and none had been transsolar, which would have really pulled the cork on everything. But it became evident that approximate intelligence had developed on three, possibly four, of the bodies in their solar system, and so it was with gnawing apprehension that they prepared to shift from observing to action modes.

When the action leader had completed his decision-making process, he assumed command status and emanated: "Individual report."

This was known to be the procedure They had ordered, and so all accepted it. The subordinate whose duty it was to carry out such commands transponded a query: "Which individual?"

This required additional decision-making, and so all waited while the leader analyzed the indications. To do so properly,

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it found it necessary to examine into many 10^5s of factors, including geographic dispersal, hereditary characteristics and state of awareness of the artifact now approaching Earth. The criteria They had programmed were simple sampling techniques in the main, so that the leader did not need to call on specialized help. It isolated three choices, all of which were optimal. One was a Party apparatnik in a suburb of Bucharest. One was a sweeper in Benares. The third was a motion-picture scenarist in Southern California. Following Their procedures for tie-breaking, the leader gamed an arbitrary choice and extruded a filament of indication: "That one."

"That one" was five feet three inches tall and twenty-seven years old. He was wholly unaware that he had been chosen to stand for all life on Earth, or even that he was being watched. He was driving his Capri from his agent's home on Gower to The World's Biggest Drugstore, practicing racing starts at the lights, and listening to the disk jockies on the car radio, when he achieved the state of awareness that made him eligible to represent humanity. He didn't know that that had happened. He only knew that he had heard something crazy in a news break. The crazy thing was that the Algonquin Nine spacecraft was on its way back from Mars, and it was bringing three real live Martians with it.

Sam Harcourt, as he was called, immediately fell into a study. Martians. He knew all about Martians, although to be sure he hadn't thought much about them since the age of thirteen. But he remembered all those marvelous old stories, and it came to him as the light turned green and the driver of the semitrailer behind him began to blow his horn, that that knowledge had a cash value to him right then. He scooted across the intersection as the light changed again, pulled over into a No Parking zone, set the handbrake, and phoned his agent. "Jesus H. Christ, Oleg," he shouted when the phone was answered, "have I got an idea. *Barsoom.*"

His agent's voice was thinly patient. "I wish you wouldn't keep calling me up, Sam. You're supposed to be seeing Chavez."

"I've got plenty of time to see Chavez, and anyway this is probably too big for him. His art-nudies are all out the window now. Don't you know? Don't you ever turn on your radio, watch TV, open the door, and listen to what people are talking about? It's Martians.

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They found live Martians, and they're bringing them back!"

The agent said, "Yes, I did hear something." Cautiously: "What about it?"

"I want to do a film about Barsoom, Oleg. That's the native name for Mars. Do you see the potential? I thought at first of one of the majors, but they're too slow, they'd miss the exploitation. It has to be now. A gorgeous red-skinned Martian princess. A big aerial fight, like the Battle of Britain, only with swords. Comedy. Sex! Oleg," cried Sam into his car phone, watching the police car that was moving slowly toward him along the Strip, "I have to hang up in a minute, but you haven't heard the best part. This isn't a Sam Harcourt original. It's a classic that every boy has read, and the beauty is, it's maybe in the public domain, because somebody didn't renew the copyrights."

"Maybe, Sam?"

"Well," said Sam, "I remember something about it. It was sometime ago, but your legal department could check it out."

"My legal department," said the agent, "gets a hundred and a half every time I ask him a question, and I have better questions to ask him than did somebody forget to renew a copyright. Anyway, you forgot something, too. Please let me remind you. Daniel Chavez made a special trip in from the Valley to hear what you're going to write for him, and, Sam, please, Chavez is eight thousand dollars cash, a guaranteed sale once it gets past the front office. Come out of the clouds, Sam, with your twenty million dollars' worth of public domain. If it's public domain, what have you got to sell anyway?"

"That's what I have an agent for," said Sam. "Call you back." And he hung up, released the brake, and was in motion, nodding pleasantly to the driver of the black-and-white before it reached him.

The subordinate proctor meditated for a few 10s of units in some concern. It was bred to be both conscientious and obedient, and it had never before encountered a situation in which its conscience conflicted with its obedience. In a sense peculiar to its species, it disliked Sam Harcourt very much.

It reached a decision and withdrew rapidly to report. "Preference for selecting an alternative specimen for evaluation?" it wheedled.

The leader was outraged. "Negative," it rapped.

Although the subordinate was far too well programmed to quarrel with a decision, some-

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thing inside it stuck at the prospect of condemning one hundred billion vertebrates and tens of trillions of lesser breeds, down to the blue-green algae, on the basis of an evaluation of Sam Harcourt. "Personal discomfort," it complained, and offered, "recommendation for alternative proctor?"

The leader assumed command mode.

"Return for continuation *or* prospect of disciplinary action," it stated disjunctively, and with what passed in its species for a sigh that subordinate proctor rejoined Sam.

To art films Daniel Chavez was what Mack Sennett had been to comedy. He was fast and cheap.

He had not always specialized in art films. His first big b.o. success, *Monster of the Maelstrom*, had been a sci-fi shocker, shot principally in his backyard swimming pool, which had a center-draining plug. Counting his profits, he saw that this was a magic money machine and looked for fuel to keep it running. It happened that his next-door neighbor was a collie breeder. One morning, listening to the yelps from the next yard and remembering some unused special-effects footage that was already paid for, Daniel Chavez came up with his next triumph, *Laddie Meets the Maelstrom Monster.* He then sensed that sci-fi had had its day and moved on. He successively rode the crest of the surfer wave, flew with the drug scene, bared all in the nudies, and arrived, home free, in the art film, a most congenial environment since hand-held cameras, finance-wise, were a lot more attractive than even rented studio space. One of his principles was low overhead. He saw no reason to maintain an office while there were booths in cafeterias and soda fountains.

As Sam Harcourt came into The World's Biggest Drug Store, Chavez was casting his next picture. "You'll do, my dear," he said, patting the ass of a young girl in hip-huggers as she rose from the seat beside him. "Don't forget, I'll pick you up so we can go over your characterization. Around nine thirty," he explained, "because I have a business dinner date." She peered impassively at Harcourt through two feet of frizzy hair and slouched away.

Harcourt took her seat and said for openers, "Chavez, *cinema verite* is dead."

"Funny you should say that," said Chavez. "I agree with you. I'm putting that kid in my next picture: *Up against the Wall, Cardinal McIntyre!* I think it has the potential of a modern *The Devils.*"

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"How would she look in brick-red body make-up, Chavez?"

"No, no. She's playing a young nun who wants to be relevant."

"No good," said Harcourt. "Relevant flicks are out. I'm talking about Martians."

"Oh, my God," said Chavez, looking at him with loathing, "I told Oleg I didn't want any more crap from you. I didn't even want to talk to you, but he said you had a fresh approach."

"That was then. I did. You would have loved it. But now I've got something better."

Chavez sighed. "Hold it while I get something to drink. You want a vanilla malted?" He half rose, looking for the waitress.

"Chocolate. I guess you didn't hear, so I have to tell you. It was on the radio. The astronauts checked in. They're coming back from Mars, and they've got real live Martians with them. And what I have to offer you today is a story about Martians that, with any luck at all, you can have in release before they're out of quarantine."

Chavez sat down again. He stroked his sideburns, looking at Sam, who rushed on:

"Real Martians, Chavez! Authentic. Timely. I'm not talking about crappy monster stuff, I'm talking about the big one you've been getting ready for all your life."

Chavez had begun to shake his head. "You know what that process stuff costs?" But he was listening.

"Who said process? Now it can be real Martians. Everybody's talking about it. I'm actually astonished you haven't heard."

Chavez meditated for a moment, rousing himself as the waitress came by. "Two malteds, honey, one black, one white. Sam, I like it a little bit."

"Not just a little bit. You like it a lot."

"I like it well enough to ask you how you're going to get them signed up. Do they speak English, do you know?"

"We can dub it. Listen, let me tell you the story. The man is a war hero. He's trapped in a cave with Indians, no, wait a minute, with Viet Cong soldiers waiting outside. They kill him. He goes outside, and—we'll call him John Carter—and Carter stares up at the stars, and he sees this one big star, Mars. He stretches out his arms to it. Do you see any big cost so far?"

"I don't even see any story so far, Sam. Why do you want to call him 'John Carter'? I'd like a better name—Rick Carstairs?"

Elated, Harcourt cried: "That's great. So Carstairs

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stretches out his arms and somehow, mysteriously, he's drawn to Mars. Right out of his body. Right into space, *psssschwt*, zooming past the stars, and all of a sudden we cut to him falling to the ground on Mars, and this great big ugly Martian is poking him with a sword. So Cart—so Carstairs jumps up, and he jumps right over the big guy. This is kind of a tricky technical point to grasp, but on Mars he can jump like crazy because—"

"Sam," chided Chavez, "don't you remember I produced *Worlds at War?* You don't have to explain that sort of thing to me. They're on a planet beyond the pull of gravity, so go on."

"Right, Chavez! So they have this terrible sword fight, and Carstairs is winning, and along comes another Martian, green this time with four arms—no," he said hastily, as Chavez began to scowl, "it could be only two arms in a regular Martian suit, if you don't want too much special effects, and Carstairs licks them all, and rescues their girl prisoner. She's beautiful, Chavez! Red. Maybe that kid could play her. Her name is Dejah, wait a minute, Dejah Thoris. She says, 'Ikky-pikky hoo-hah Barsoom?' Carstairs says, 'I don't understand your words, madam, but in tribute to your loveliness I cast my sword at your feet.' And he does. Well, she blushes. He doesn't know why, but—what's the matter?"

"I don't get something there. You said she was red-skinned, right? How can you tell she's blushing?"

Sam hesitated. The waitress brought their malteds, and he unzipped his straws from their wrapper and took a long sip before he answered. "A good point," he said. "I think I can handle it, but let's pass it for now. Anyway, she picks up his sword and hands it to him, and then she acts like she's waiting for something, but he doesn't know what. Some other Martians come at them, and he picks her up and jumps the hell away with her over the roof of the breeding shed—I didn't tell you that part. They're near a breeding shed where these green Martians lay their eggs. That's only a detail, but there's good values in it. Comedy. Maybe there's this one Martian that's a sort of a butterfingers, and he drops this egg, and it's his own little boy—"

Chavez finished his malted, wiped his lips, and said courteously, "Let's pass that part about the eggs for now, too, although I ought to say I think it stinks."

"Well, anyway. So then Carter and the girl get away,

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and there's a hell of a big aerial battle—what is it?"

Chavez waggled a finger. "Carter, Sam?"

"Yeah, Carstairs. But then is the big part. An aerial battle in the thin air of dying Mars! This is the only place where you'll need a lot of process stuff, but it's going to be worth it. And, listen, I have an idea that could help out with the money part. How'd you like to get the whole shooting script for nothing? I mean, not a nickel, Chavez, except maybe a few grand to cover expenses—maybe not even that," he said hastily, watching Chavez's face. "Let's say even no cash at all, just a cut of the producer's net."

Chavez's lips were compressed now, the fingertips of his joined hands pressed against them in thought. He parted the fingers far enough to ask, "How big a cut, Sam?"

"We'll work it out. Hell, even fifteen percent. I don't care, as long as it makes a good picture—twelve and a half, maybe," he amended. "I'd frankly prefer not to discuss money with you. Oleg doesn't like his clients doing that."

"Yeah. I know what Oleg doesn't like." Chavez stroked his left sideburn very hard for a moment. Then he pulled back his coat sleeve to examine the Accutron on his hairy wrist and said, "I'll be open with you, Sam. With costs the way they are now that kind of deal could put me right through he wringer. Still, maybe we can work something out. Not on those lines, exactly."

Sam protested. "I was only trying to help with front money. Anyway, they win the battle and take the girl back to her father, he's a local king, and then Carstairs sees there's something wrong. The girl's gone all sort of mad and crying, and her father's scowling and fingering his ray gun. What'd he do? The father says, 'Huppeta-huppeta cranberries!' and it looks like there's going to be another fight, but then the girl, he's taught her a little English by now, she says, 'Rick, I can't figure you out,' and he says, 'Why, what's the matter?' and then it comes out. That business where he threw the sword in front of her? On Mars, that's like a proposal of marriage, and when he didn't follow through, that's like treating her like a tramp. So anyway they clear that up and—and that's all. Clinch. Music up and out. Final bit of comedy with this pet mind-reading kind of dog she's got. Chavez," he said earnestly, "I can see every frame of this film. I only hope I've been able to make you see it too."

Chavez meditatively sipped the last of his ice water.

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He said, "Sam. I like it."

"A little bit, Chavez?"

"More than a little bit, Sam. I got to think. Also I've got to dig a little more about these Martians. But—"

He smiled and beckoned the waitress. He offered her his American Express card to cover the two malteds, the two earlier iced teas, and the cheese Danish he'd split with the girl. "Let me sleep on it," he said. "I'll call Oleg in the morning. I mean that, Sam. Don't go telling him to call me up the minute you get out of here. It's possible there's something there, so don't crap it up." And they parted, each, in his way, well pleased.

It was not within the competence of a subordinate proctor to make decisions. Once their race, too, had been under the scrutiny of Those Who ordered the Galaxy, and although they had passed and been allowed to continue, subject, of course, to certain modifications and improvements, ancestral fear remained. The proctor which returned from its task of monitoring Sam felt some empathy and concern. Its projections pointed clearly toward an inevitable conclusion. It would not make the decision, but it had a pretty clear notion of what the decision would be.

Sentients like Sam were rare in the Galaxy, because They did not care to tolerate weeds in Their garden.

On hearing the report, the leader activated its decision-making systems and came to a conclusion, which it stated in the form of an imperative: "Verify by means of making a prediction and observing its occurrence," it instructed them, in the manner of what even humans knew as "the scientific method."

"Description of prediction?" interrogated the subordinates.

"Prediction based on observation and analysis: specimen will exhibit no manifestations of creativity, compassion, , , or within the next 10^7 time units." (The three omitted terms do not have equivalents in human languages.)

"Recommendation if verified?"

The leader hesitated slightly. "Randomization of all organic matter of this system," it proposed.

This conclusion was not lightly reached. It was not that the proctors gave, as they would have said, a quark's emission for the human race, or even for the Martians which were even at that moment landing at Kennedy Spaceport. It was not even that they felt sympathy for a race condemned

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to die. Their concern was more personal. The task of randomizing all organic matter in even this trivial solar system, thus destroying all its life and giving it a fresh start, would be most arduous and time-consuming. Their opportunities for estivation would be very slim while it was going on.

Moreover, there was a certain apprehension. It was known that Those Who mandated them rather enjoyed cuddly pets. It had seemed that there was some hope of discovering some new creatures of that sort for Them in this system, for at the time of the last inspection the highest primate on Earth had been *Oreopithecus*, a creature which was hairy, tree-living, four-footed and, in a sense which Those Who had put them there appreciated, rather cute. It was disappointing that *Oreopithecus* had developed into Sam. The projections of the proctors included some probability of displeasure on Their part over the negligence that had let the evolution take place.

Nevertheless their duty was clear, and each of the subordinate decision-makers, reviewing the evidence, concurred: "Agreed."

The necessity of the leader's decision was clearly in accord with Their directions. Therefore the subordinate proctors lined up before the leader, extended the spurs on each of their twenty-four feet, and kicked it to death, as was their right. When they had finished eating, a new leader assumed the responsibility of implementing their decision.

Sam's mind was glowing with thoughts of screen credits and residuals as he drove out of the parking lot and around the corner. He ducked into a Phillips 66 filling station, waved away the pump attendant as he parked, and picked up the phone.

"Now what, for the Christ sake?" asked the agent irritably when Sam had identified himself. "Don't tell me. Chavez laughed in your face, and you want me to find you another live one, right?"

Sam chortled, "You couldn't be wronger, he's hooked. H, O, O, ooked, hooked. He practically promised fifteen percent of the net, in fact. I count on you to firm up the details."

There was silence on the phone, except for the raspberry noise of static from someone somewhere racing his car engine. Sam grinned. "You having a heart attack, Oleg? Surprised I pulled off a deal you couldn't make in a million years?"

Cautiously, "I have to admit," the agent said, "that I

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didn't really anticipate this outcome, exactly. When you say 'practically guaranteed,' Sam, exactly how practically?"

"Come on, Oleg. The details are your problem, right? That's what you always tell me: 'Let me put on the screws, dummy.' But he didn't say no."

"Yeah, bullshit, boy." But the agent's tone was reluctantly admiring.

"You'll call him?"

The agent rallied his skepticism, which had always served him well. "Maybe I'll call him. I already called some people. You've got a little problem you don't know about. That 'Barsoom' stuff? I talked to a fellow that knows, and they straightened out that copyright matter."

"Christ, Oleg," howled Sam, "if you blew this deal—"

"What blew? It's all on the record, no problem. I'm just telling you that it isn't public domain, like you thought."

"All right," cried Sam, refusing to come down. "What can it cost? Offer them fifty th— Offer them twenty-five percent of my take. Five hundred dollars for an option. They'll go for it. If you're the contracts man you tell me you are, they will. Anyway," he said, picking up speed, "this is only for openers. What do we need Chavez for? If Chavez'll go for it, maybe Paramount will go. Cosby. Kubrick. With the values this thing has got, capitalizing on a hundred million dollars' worth of free publicity—"

"Yeah, yeah!" Oleg interrupted. "Look at him! One 'maybe' from a Daniel Chavez, and he's telling me the agency business." But his tone was not hostile. In fact, it was definitely ingratiating. "All right, Sam. We're in this together and I'll roll the dice with you. And listen, I've got something that can help out. You know Dorfman, the naturalist? Best seal man in the country. Used to train for Marineland of the Pacific. Well, I happen to have the representation for him."

"Hold it there a minute," said Sam. An unreasoning panic began to seep into his veins. "Oleg, why are you telling me about this crappy animal act?"

"I mean, for your Martians."

"I don't get what you're talking about."

"Well, Sam. Maybe you can't get the real ones, right? But I see an angle. I was just looking at the pictures on TV. Take away those funny little arms and the teeth, and what have you got? A regular seal. Now, if there's anybody who can dress up a seal to look like a Martian, I assure you, Sam, this Dorfman is—"

"Oleg!" screamed Sam.

There was a pause. "Oh,"

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said the agent. "You mean you didn't see what they look like yet?" Another pause. Then, with the normal irritation back in his voice, the agent said, "Sam, look, I got a meeting. Tell you what you do. Go home and turn on a TV set and look at your Martians, then call me back. If you've got anything to call me about."

The new leader of the team of proctors dabbled fretfully with the mud of its estivation hutch, considering certain disagreeable aspects of its own future. When the subordinate returned, the leader received its report on the behavior of the subject human in silence.

The other proctors waited for its response. They did not wait patiently, since they had never been impatient. They simply waited.

At length the leader announced its findings: "Prediction confirmed. Model verified. Subject race does not conform to minimum requirements."

The subordinate proctors murmured among themselves.

The leader assumed command mode: "Instructions: Preparation of synoptic report. Recommendation to randomize. Transmission of data and recommendation to—" He did not complete the sentence, only raised several of his eyes to look upward.

The subordinate proctors proceeded at once to their various duties. Those charged with such matters prepared holographic representations of Sam Harcourt and of a number of humans associated with him, including the sweeper in Benares and the Rumanian party functionary; of assorted terrestrial artifacts which they thought They would find interesting, including the *Queen Elizabeth II*, an Atlas Five booster rocket, and a transistor radio; of the Martians which were now staring sluggishly, with cow-like eyes, at the TV cameras in the briefing room of Patrick AFB, just south of Kennedy Spaceport. They included many subsidiary bits of evidence, such as a demographic map of Mars, showing the primitive villages the voyagers had left, as well as a number of Martian artifacts. Their basic list completed, they paused to consider what else might be of value. It was a question of some importance. Assuming Those Who appointed them followed the recommendation, and it was unthinkable They would not, this omnium-gatherum would stand through all eternity as the only surviving record of the then-vanished creatures of the solar system of Earth. At length they chose to reproduce some drawings of jockstraps and bikini briefs from a Sears,

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Roebuck catalog, and the entire contents of Leningrad's Hermitage museum, and considered their work done.

At that point those charged with encoding information into packets of binary bits did so, and those charged with transmission began to reorient their vessel, as it swung in its long orbit between Mercury and Saturn, and prepared to send.

And so a pulsed series of message-bearing particles leaped into space, traveling at the speed of light toward the place where Those Who directed them had Their locus of existence.

The message stated, fully and fairly—to the extent that those concepts had meaning in the minds of Those Who guided the Galaxy or Their servants—all that was needful to be said about mankind.

From then on, the process would be automatic and inevitable. The recommendation to destroy all life in the solar system would be passed on by higher order intelligences to the Highest of all, and except for the unlikely event of Their deciding to reverse the recommendations of Their subordinates, the command to proceed would be returned at once.

Life would be destroyed. Earth, Mars, South Polar Venus and Ganymede, the four sites now known to possess autochthonous intelligent life of some degree, would be the first to be randomized, but all the rest would follow, down to the least formaldehyde radical in the farthest solar gas cloud. The planets of the sun would wheel along, bare and ready for a fresh start. Bombay and Beverly Hills would be one with Nineveh and Tyre.

The bean the sampling machine had popped out for testing sat in front of his 27-inch TV screen, staring with rage and loathing at what he saw. A forgotten glass of soda water had gone warm and flat in his hand.

Seals? The Martians were not even seals. He glared at them in full living color, the picture as sharp as eighteen hundred dollars and a community antenna could make it, and hated them. With everything the network technicians could do going for them, on the screen of the best television set in Brentwood Heights, they looked like big, charcoal-gray slugs.

"Dejah Thoris," sobbed Sam. "The *bastards.*"

If only they had just been ugly— If only they had just been strange— What they were was nasty, disgusting and dull

Sam Harcourt set down the glass of soda, snapped the

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remote button, and let the picture fade away. With it went all his dreams of red-skinned beauties and battles in the Barsoomian skies. After a long time, he complained to the blank screen: "Why couldn't you at least look like *something?*"

But they couldn't. The Martians had evolved to fit an environment orders of magnitude harsher than our own. They were slow, dull and hideous not because they wanted to be, but because they could not be anything but what their environment made them. Any more than could Sam Harcourt.

And while he sat there, the message that carried Earth's death sentence sped out across the plane of the ecliptic, toward a point in the constellation of Sagittarius, where an interwined looping of stars in a fanciful arrangement lay half across the Galaxy from Earth.

While Sam was phoning his agent from the Phillips 66 gas station, the message was already crossing the orbit of Mars. Before he reached home, it leaped the asteroid belt and the orbit of Jupiter. It passed Saturn while his television set was warming up, approached Uranus as he sat staring at his fate, launching itself toward the orbits of Neptune and Pluto, and beyond.

The proctors, murmuring among themselves, returned to estivation, getting ready for the demands that would be made on them when the reply to their message was received and the hard work of ending life on all the sun's planets would begin. They would be grateful then for all the rest they could store up, although in truth there was plenty of time to rest.

The abode of Those Who ruled them, on and around the planets that floated among their various stars, was thirty-one thousand light-years away, by Earthly measurements. Thirty-one thousand years it would take for the message to get there, fifty-one thousand years more for the response to come back. The sentence was passed. The date for the execution was set. In the year 64,000 A.D., give or take a century or two, humanity's day would be done.

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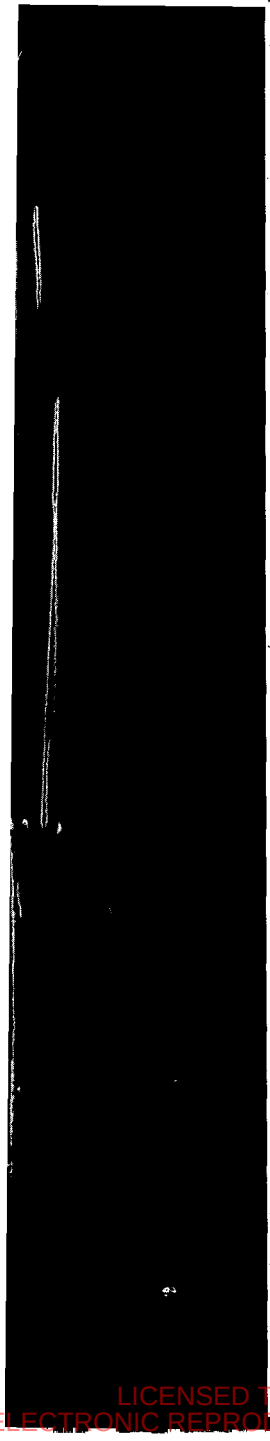

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